



# JEEVADHARA

Vol. XXXVIII Rs. 20/-

## **CHRIST IN INDIAN POETRY II**

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**Edited by  
Jacob Parappally**

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A JOURNAL FOR SOCIO-RELIGIOUS RESEARCH

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## Christ in Indian Poetry II

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## Editorial

Poets like William Blake strongly resisted the tendency of the Enlightenment to reduce Jesus to a reformer or a philosopher or just an important historical figure bound by space and time. For him Jesus was more than a thinker or a moralizer. Jesus was the supreme embodiment of the "poetic", the link between this-worldly and other-worldly, historical and trans-historical, human and divine. The Christ of all poetic imaginations seems to come closer to the mystery of Christ. Poets give expression to their experience of Christ through symbols, metaphors and through various imageries. They give an insight into the mystery that defies all human articulations. Thus the images of Christ expressed in poetry attempts to reveal the truth about the one who claimed to be the Truth which cannot be defined even by a highly nuanced and systematically articulated dogma. To define is to mark limits. Jesus Christ cannot be defined. Even during his time on earth people called him Prophet, Messiah, Teacher and so on. But he was not happy with any of these titles because these titles categorized him. His self-understanding and the consciousness of his mission could not be expressed by these titles. Even the narrations about Jesus in the New Testament could be considered a great work of art which offers a believer innumerable possibilities to discover ever new dimensions of that Truth of which he or she is a part. Poets of all times who encountered Jesus Christ as the Lord and Master of their lives have given marvellous expressions to their experience of the Mystery of Christ through their creative imagination and poetic artistry.

The Unbound Word of God finds numerous ways of expression that it reaches and touches the hearts of people inviting them to become better humans. Poetry, song and music appeal to the affective

dimensions of humans. The number of Christian devotional songs composed, sung and produced as cassettes and CDs in various regional languages of India in the recent two or three decades probably outnumber all hymns and songs written in the last two or three centuries. Among the various reasons for this sudden increase in the number of devotional songs composed and sung and received by the faithful enthusiastically, one reason may be that the Christian believers are searching for a Christ-experience that is more emotionally satisfying than sometimes mechanically celebrated rituals. In the bhakti-tradition of India, it was devotional songs composed by the popular saints of India and sung by those dominated castes and the down-trodden that brought them to a religiosity of the heart with a personal relationship with their God. This bhakti inspired them to value love all humans and stand against social evils, religious oppression and meaningless ritualism. Poems and songs can inspire people for the transformation of themselves and their society more than dogmas and doctrines.

Many appealing portraits of Christ are presented in a number of poems written in various languages of India. The present issue of *Jeevadhara* includes four articles dealing with poetic articulations about the person and mission of Christ in Kannada, Marathi, Gujarati and Tamil. This is the second and concluding part of our presentation of Christ in the Indian Poetry. We could not include many valuable poetic presentations of Christ in the Indian languages other than the ones in these two issues. We would attempt to present them in one of the future issues.

Joseph Lobo presents the portrait of Christ in the Kannada Poetry of Govinda Pai (1883-1963). The author deals mainly with one poem of Govinda Pai, namely "Golgotha" written in 1931. The life situation of Govinda Pai has influenced his views on various aspects of the theme, namely, the death of Jesus on the Cross. The uniqueness of Govinda Pai's "Golgotha" is that while the NT story of Jesus as such is kept largely intact, it is contextualized by means of using apt imagery, metaphors, similes and comparisons. In the last section of the article the author draws some conclusions which would be helpful for the development of a contextual Christology.



Nelson Falcao introduces to the readers the poetry of Narayan Vaman Tilak (1861-1919), a Marathi Christian poet whose hymns and poems are sung even today. Tilak knew well that if Christian ideas are expressed in Indian spiritual forms, Indian Christianity would become more congenial to the Indian spirit. In order that the Christians may have their own Purāṇa on Jesus Christ Tilak started composing the Christāyana. Tilak experienced Christ as the Great Mother and the Perfect Guru. He combined these two experiences and developed the idea of Christ as Mother-Guru (*Guru-Mauli*). He promoted singing of Bhajans, reciting Kirtans and the reading of the Purāṇas. Following the tradition of great Marathi poet-saints like Tukaram he composed *Abhangas* which expressed his deep Christic experience.

Sebastian V. in his article presents the images of Christ articulated by eight Gujarati poets. One of the earliest poetic expressions about Christ was by the famous Gujarati poet Kavi Kant (1867-1923). Several poems of Kant reflect his Christian faith, especially his own turmoil and confusion. One of his well known poems 'Endless Love' is about the story of the Prodigal son. The author also gives an overview of the Christian contributions to the Gujarati literature in general and in particular he introduces to the reader the attempts of some poets like Kalapi (Sursinhji Takthsinhji Gohil, 1874-1900), Sundaram (Tribhuvandas Purushottamdas Luhar, 1908-1991), Priyakant Maniyar (1927-1976), Niranjan Bhagat (1926-) Yoseph Macwan (1940-) Philip Clark and Vipin Parekh to express in Gujarati poetry themes related to the life and mission of Jesus Christ.

A. Antony Cruz makes an attempt to introduce to the reader various titles of Jesus that appear in the Tamil epic *Yesu Maakavyam* by Nirmala Suresh. The poetess brings out various dimensions of the Personality of Jesus in this long epic with 144 chapters. While being faithful to the Gospel narrations about the life and mission of Jesus Nirmala Suresh gives fresh and creative interpretations to the life and teachings of Jesus through certain imageries drawn from the socio-cultural and religious context of her life.

In the concluding article of this issue, *Jesus- the Story-teller*, an attempt is made to present the creative talent of Jesus to communicate

his message through stories or parables. The poetic imagination of Jesus finds expression in the imageries and symbols he had chosen to express the inexhaustible mystery of the love of God whom he encountered as his own unique Abba and its consequences for the transformation of humans and their world. Though the drama of Jesus' life unfolds on the stage of the world at a particular time in history, he transcends space and time. Poets are priests who can mediate the experience of historical and trans-historical, human and divine dimensions of the mystery of Christ in poetry. Through their poems flowing from their deep experience of Jesus they continue to write ever new testaments of the one who continues to challenge humans to become what they are called to become.

**Jacob Parappally**



# Jesus Christ in the Kannada Poem “Golgotha”

Joseph Lobo

In this article the author attempts to discover a way of doing Contextual Christology from a poem on the Last Day of Jesus by Govinda Pai (1883-1963). This poem was written in *Jhampe Meter* which is the poet's own creation and has some similarities to what is known in English literature as “blank verse”. There are a number of Jesuological and Christological themes present in the poem. An attempt is made to show the various hermeneutical processes operative in the composition and reading of the poetic text. The life situation of Govinda Pai has influenced his views on various aspects of the theme, especially, the death of Jesus on the Cross. The uniqueness of Govinda Pai's “Golgotha” is that while the NT story of Jesus as such is kept largely intact, it is contextualized by means of using apt imagery, metaphors, similes and comparisons. In the last section of the article the author draws some conclusions which would be helpful for the development of a contextual Christology.

## Introduction

This article deals with a Kannada poem titled “Golgotha”, composed by Govinda Pai<sup>1</sup> (a *Gawda Saraswath Brahmin* – of

1 Some important biographical notes :

1. The first Kannadiga to receive the *Rashtrakavi* award.
2. The only Kannadiga to have learned 22 languages
3. Composed 21 sonnets in Kannada (*Chathurdashapadi*)
4. First one to research into the relationship between Kannda and Greek languages

Karnataka) in 1931.<sup>2</sup> As acknowledged by the poet in the foreword, the text of the poem is based on the books that he read about Jesus, especially the four canonical gospels.<sup>3</sup> In the foreword, the poet first of all tries to construct a 'harmonious' story of Jesus by culling out various details from all the four canonical gospels. Strangely, he leaves out the resurrection narratives. In fact, he says that the gospels end their story of Jesus with his execution and death!<sup>4</sup> Since the poem is

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5. The only Kannadiga to translate the Japanese dramas belonging to "No" tradition into Kannada
  6. The first one to reject the well-known second-letter rhyme in Kannada poetry and to bring out new forms of poetry.
  7. Has done formidable research on Saraswaths (a Brahmin subcaste).
  8. Through research established that the Konkani language emerged from Magadi Prakrit and is not a dialect of Marathi.
  9. Rejected several honors and held till the end that he produced literary works only for enjoyment.
  10. At the age of fifteen established a mastery over several Kannada epic poems and prosodies.
  11. The only Kannada poet to translate the poem of Umar Khayyam from the Persian original.
  12. His total literary productions run into about 3,500 pages: among those that are available are: 185 prose compositions (these include prose criticisms and historical research) and 150 poetic compositions, 12 dramas.
2. First published in the four consecutive issues of *Svadeshabhimani*, August-September, 1931. It was published as a book first in 1937. The text has 377 lines. The text referred to here is from *Golgotha matthu Vaishakhi*, published by K. Jayacharya, Kavyalaya Publishers, V edition, 1983.
  3. In the foreword the poet acknowledges his sources. They are: the four canonical gospels, Moffat, *Everyman's Life of Jesus*; H.G. Wells, *A Short History of the World*; Renan, *Life of Jesus*; works on the life of Christ by Dean Fahrar, and Tennyson's "In Memorium".
  4. *Ibid.*, p.33.

about the *last day* of Jesus<sup>5</sup>, the poet may have left out the resurrection narratives intentionally.

The poem as such begins with the depiction of the Jews desiring to have Jesus condemned to death at the court of Caiaphas the high priest (1-3)<sup>6</sup> and ends with the portrayal of Mary Magdalene near the crucifixion scene looking at the cross with deep hope and intense expectation in a totally serene atmosphere (367-377).

This article is an attempt to understand, mainly, the Jesuological and Christological themes present in the poem, to lay bare the literary devices used in the poem and thereby to look at the various hermeneutical processes operative in the composition and reading of the poetic text. Becoming aware of the personality traits and the historical background of the poet is considered a necessary factor that could shed some light on all these themes. The last section of the article draws some conclusions in terms of enlisting the implications for a contextual Christological reflection.

### 1. The Poet's Person and His Historical Setting

Govinda Pai was born in Mangalore in 1883. A very prominent Christian presence in Mangalore can be traced back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. However, the establishment of the Basel mission (from Switzerland) in 1834 with its educational institutions and technical training centers and the arrival of Jesuits in 1878 and their starting of educational institutions, printing press, technical training centers, health care units and direct evangelization work in the neighboring villages can be seen as the beginning of a new Christian era in the history of Mangalore and its suburbs. With this, perhaps for the first time, Christian presence became a 'force' to reckon with in view of dominant Hindu castes. Though the local economy continued to remain in the hands of Hindu and Muslim trader castes (*Konkanas* and *Byaris* respectively), the mushrooming of Christian educational institutions and their rather quick

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5 His three other poems on the "last days" are a. *Vaishakhi* (the last day of Buddha), b. *Prabhasa* (the last day of Krishna) and c. *Dehali* (the last day of Mahatma Gandhi) – the last two are incomplete works.

6 Numbers in the bracket refer to the lines of the poem *Golgotha*.



rise to fame may have sounded an alarm to non-Christian dominant groups.

Secondly, unlike Hinduism and Islam, the face of Christianity has always been a concrete historical human being – Jesus Christ. Despite all the medieval crusades and such other violent Christian movements, one can still see a deep admiration for the person of Jesus Christ among non-Christians in India. Persons like Mahatma Gandhi and Vivekananda, who strongly denounce the Christian (British) atrocities, do not fail to express their deep admiration for the person of Jesus Christ. It is against this background that we must look at the non-Christian (specifically Hindu higher castes) reaction in India to the “invading” Christianity on the one hand, and an “appealing Jesus Christ” on the other. Govinda Pai was born and grew up in this very atmosphere. The situation during the Bengal renaissance of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was somewhat similar: on the one hand there was a national awakening in terms of the independence struggle and hence a strong will to banish the British from Indian soil; at the same time the religion of the British (Christianity) and especially its founder (Jesus Christ) made a deep impression on many a luminary of Bengal renaissance. In a way, it must have been a very awkward situation – you are impressed by the religion (and its founder) of someone whom you despise! Under such a situation we note three main responses:

1. Embrace Christ and Christianity by means of baptism (e.g. Brahmabandhav Upadhyay in Bengal)
2. Admire Christ and despise Christianity (e.g. Mahatma Gandhi and Vivekananda). Such attitudes are essentially of two types:
  - a. A genuine admiration and personal devotion to Christ.
  - b. A provisional (and at times even strategic) admiration of Christ to deal with one’s own inner “discomfort” and to maintain certain integrity in the public view.
3. Despise both Christ and Christianity (some present-day Hindutva ideologues such as Sitaram Goel<sup>7</sup> and others.)

7 See for instance his publications: *History of Hindu-Christian Encounters (AD 304- 1996)*, Voice of India, New Delhi, 1989, 1996;

I would like to locate Govinda Pai in the second main category.<sup>8</sup> It is difficult to attribute any one of its two sub-categories to him, since it involves a more thorough biographical study about the person which is hardly affordable here. I shall rather make a rough sketch of his person from available sources<sup>9</sup>. I have referred to the following biographical sources:

While thoroughly rooted in his own religious tradition<sup>10</sup> Govinda Pai nevertheless was an ardent admirer of religious figures such as Jesus Christ, Buddha, and Basavanna. He was a man of great intellectual caliber<sup>11</sup>—reported to have learnt about 21 languages that include Greek, French, German and even Japanese! And yet a man

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*Jesus Christ – An Artifice for Aggression*, Voice of India, New Delhi, 1994.

- 8 V. M. Inamdar opines: Apart from his poetic and scholarly skills he “admired the man [Jesus] and the message from the bottom of his heart. Being himself a man of very deep humanitarian sympathies it was very easy for the poet in him to be completely absorbed into every aspect of the subject and experience it in total sincerity. The result is a poem like *Golgotha*.” See his *Govinda Pai,; Kannada Writers and their Works*, No. 8, Institute of Kannada Studies, University of Mysore, 1983, p. 47.
- 9 I have referred to the following biographical sources:
  1. G. P. Rajarathnam (ed.), *Manjeshwarada Sri M. Govinda Pai avara Patragalu*, Videhal publ., Malleshwaram, Bangalore, 1971.
  2. *Hridaya Ranga: A Collection of 44 Poems in Kannada by M. Govinda Pai*, Kavyalaya Publishers, Mysore, 1969. (esp. the foreword by Dr. G. Varadaraja Rao)
  3. V. M. Inamdar, Op.cit.
  4. H. Nagarajayya & Kavyajeevi, *Govinda Pai: Baduku-Baraha*, Kannada Sahitya Parishat, Bangalore, 1976.
- 10 H. Nagarajayya & Kavyajeevi, op.cit give a brief sketch of his daily spiritual exercises. p. 16.
- 11 Given the fact that Govinda Pai was a poet, dramatist, research scholar in the fields of linguistics, origin and history of languages, and history and was awarded the Rashtrakavi award, V.M. Inamdar calls him more an institution than an individual. “The bulk of so much work supported

of simplicity and austerity – he refused many a public honour<sup>12</sup>; a man of deep concern for justice and fairness; a man of deep contemplation and a lover of nature<sup>13</sup>; a man with a tender heart for children, students, scholars and commoners alike; a man who sharply criticized the practice of untouchability.<sup>14</sup> The inspiring factors in the totality of his poetic corpus seem to be: an ardent religiosity, deep love and compassion for the suffering<sup>15</sup> and day-to-day life situations.<sup>16</sup> His staunch patriotism found expression in his compositions regarding the glory of India and the importance of the independence struggle in the pre-independent India (totally six poems)<sup>17</sup>. He composed two poems (and other writings) expressing the joy and enthusiasm at the dawn of independence. He was critical of and was disappointed about poverty and corruption in the post-independence era, and expressed his sentiments about it in six poems. Though he confined himself to the literary world, his astute social consciousness was expressed in his poems regarding the *Quit India* movement, bombing of

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by wide scholarship and sustained by single-minded and single-handed devotion would be the despair of many an institution. That is why the cliché used above expresses nothing less than the literal truth. His work in the field of historical and literary research gives him the stature of an institution all by himself". V. M. Inamdar, Op.cit. p.2.

- 12 H. Nagarajayya & Kavyajivi, op.cit., p.29.
- 13 For instance in his poem "Paramathmanelliruvanu?" (Where does God dwell?), he contemplatively traces the abode of God in creation: in the flowing water, in the moonlight, in the singing of the birds etc.
- 14 Cf. his poem "Holeyanu Yaaru?" (Who is the Untouchable?)
- 15 For instance several of his short poems are based on tragic events. E.g *Andinindake nakkilla attilla* (*she did not laugh or cry from that day*) is a poem on a mother of 3 children who lost her husband; so also *Baale ninnya thammanelli*, *Vidaya*.
- 16 S. Havanur, *Govinda Pai: Samagra Vangmaya Sameekshe* (Govinda Pai: A Survey of his Entire Literature), Rashtra Kavi Govinda Pai Shatamanotsava Kendra Samiti, Mangalore University, 1983, p.55.
- 17 For instance his one act play *Chitrabanu or 1942*, Kavyalaya publ, Mysore, 1942 (first edition 1962)



Hiroshima,<sup>18</sup> the Italian invasion of Turkey<sup>19</sup>, the death of lakhs of people during a famine in Bengal<sup>20</sup> in 1944, etc. Many of his poems articulate his strong response to day-to-day events that impressed him. In sum, one finds a high degree of consistency between his life and his compositions (poetic or otherwise).

All his poems, short and long, carry the stamp and impress of his personality in which a patriot's fervor for the motherland was mingled with almost a saint's faith in divine dispensation and the consequent attitude of devout humility and prayer. This attitude underlies all his poetic utterances and forms the basic note (*sruti*) of all his song. His was a deeply religious mind in the sense that he regarded love and compassion as the greatest of all virtues which, in their highest form, invested men like Jesus Christ and Gautama the Buddha with the glory and grandeur of godhood.<sup>21</sup>

From all such data, perhaps we can safely say that Christ (like Buddha) did not remain for him only a subject of his poetry. His admiration for him was genuine and deep-rooted.

Certain sections of the text of the poem, as we shall see below, at times express a mere admiration for the man Jesus and at other times betray a type of knowledge of Jesus Christ that goes beyond the affirmation of his mere humanity. To use an analogy from the early decades of Christian era, the poet appears to be neither a "gentile" nor a "believing Christian". Is he then analogous to a contemporary of Jesus, who is affected by Jesus but has not yet made up his mind to commit himself to him personally? The poet does not seem to be explicitly sharing the resurrection faith of

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18 Cf. his sonnet entitled "Anu Bomb". He questions whether dropping of the atomic bomb is the end of the war or the mother of many wars; especially when it has killed lakhs of innocent people. Cf. also another sonnet entitled "Hiroshima".

19 Cf. his poem "Turkiya paravaagi Devarodane prarthane" (A prayer to God on behalf of Turkey)

20 Cf. his poem "Muvatthaidu Laksha" (25 lakhs)

21 V. M. Inamdar, Op.cit., pp. 2-3.

Christianity. However the ending verses powerfully paint a dawn of hope and expectation. What becomes clear here is that the ending note of "Golgotha" is neither negative nor pessimistic. It does not even sing a melancholic tune; it is rather highly optimistic. Is it then an indirect way of expressing the resurrection faith in a unique way? Could it be considered one of the ways of responding to the type of historical circumstances (as mentioned above) that the poet faced? It is difficult to draw any definite conclusion; hence the portrayal of Jesus Christ in "Golgotha" has the shades of both a Jesuology and Christology. I shall explicate these two terms a little later.

## 2. Literary Devices used in the Poem and Their Effects

As far as the subject matter of the poem is concerned there is nothing new except some "distortions" of the canonical gospel narratives; although many non-Christian critics have emphasized the poet's scrupulous fidelity to the canonical texts.<sup>22</sup> The originality of the poet rather consists in the use of his literary devices that make the scenes charged with different emotions. The references to the Old Testament<sup>23</sup> and to a typically 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish and Greco-

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22 Cf. *Ibid.*, p.47.

23 For instance, Pilate before Jesus (and not Jesus before Pilate) is depicted as the ancient serpent (cf. Gen 3) looking at the fruit of life but not in a position to eat (comprehend?) it (Golgotha: 21-25); reference to the deluge during Noah's times (Golgotha: 273-274) though it looks a bit out of context in the depiction of the contrasting nature of the barren clouds that gathered at Golgotha, nevertheless contributes towards creating a scene that has certain biblical characteristics; reference to the 9<sup>th</sup> plague of Egypt (Golgotha: 322) during the death of Jesus on the cross, once again roots the poem in biblical imagery. Lines 70 (*Jesus is like lamb that carries the sins of the world, like the dove caught in the midst of vultures*) and 250-52 (*Despite all his suffering he did not say a word nor a 'no', like the cuckoo that is attacked by crows*) echo the Isaian Servant Songs (Is 42,2; 53,7). The cosmic upheavals signifying the "day of Yahweh" (Zeph 1,15; Joel 2,10 etc.) are kept intact in the poem (Golgotha: 271-77; 315-24)- cf. E. Noronha, "Gogotha", in H.M. Nayaka (ed.), *Govinda Pai: A Collection of Essays on the Life and Works of Sri Govinda Pai*, publ. The Institute

Roman milieu, use of powerful similes and metaphors that have historical, geographical and even theological references to OT and NT<sup>24</sup>, and finally his successful attempt at bringing out a sense of victorious hope from the "womb" of the horrifying tragedy of crucifixion – all these factors make "Golgotha" a witness to the poetic genius of Govinda Pai. It is in this connection that we need to look at the effective use of literary devices.

### a. Basic Characteristics

The poem is steeped in *karuna* (compassion), *shantha* (peace), *adbhuta* (the awe- inspiring)<sup>25</sup>, *bhayanaka* (horror) and *bhibhatsa* (disgust) *rasas*. The genius of Govinda Pai can be seen in his ability to enter into a completely foreign world – the world of NT – and vibrate so deeply with it that the imagery, metaphors and similes that are used in the poem bring out the story of Jesus Christ in a way that even a non-Christian can vibrate with.<sup>26</sup> Both *Golgotha* and *Vaishakhi* (a poem on the last day of Buddha) begin with sunrise and end with moonrise. Since the whole of the poem is flanked by such optimistic depictions it becomes clear that the darkness is denied the last laugh. Nature is made to resonate with and react to the events of the day/history and thereby made to provide different backdrops to the drama, as it were.<sup>27</sup>

### b. The Points of view in the poem

The personality of Jesus (the most central character) is depicted from four different angles as it were: a) from the point of view of

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of Kannada Studies, University of Mysore, First edition, 1983, pp.47, 48-49.

24 For instance, Dead Sea, the river Jordan, Sea of Galilee; Jesus is called "ladder between heaven and earth" (*Golgotha*: 78-79) etc.

25 Hampana & Kavyajivi, *Op.cit.*, p.69.

26 *Ibid.*

27 L. S. Sheshagiri Rao, "Golgotha matthu Vaishakhi" in S.S. Lakshminarayana Bhatta (ed), *Govinda Pai: Shathamana Smarane* (Govinda Pai: Centennial Memory), Karnataka Sahitya Academy, Bangalore, 1984, p.35



Pilate (what he saw), b) what Pilate could not see, but the poet sees, c) the way Jesus himself takes up (sees) his suffering, d) Jesus' attitude towards his tormentors.<sup>28</sup>

*c. Blending of the tragic with the hopeful* (The italicized lines in the following paragraphs are the paraphrased texts from the poem)

The opening lines of the poem speak of *a cock crowing thrice and falling silent like the conscience of the Jews who wished to kill Jesus; the moon setting, disgusted with the decision of Caiaphas and the sun reluctant to rise given the tragedy of the day* (1-5).<sup>29</sup> These lines only partially set the mood of the poem. For immediately come (and strangely) the lines that speak about *morning birds singing the news that the Son of God would come back to heaven and the gentle breeze carrying the good tidings* (6-10). Such blending of the tragic and the hopeful seems to be the central characteristic of the whole poem: a painful (*karuna rasa*), horrifying (*bhayanaka rasa*) and even disgusting (*bhibhatsa rasa*) tragedy is well combined with a deeply hopeful and joyful note!

The poem ends with a similar blending: *Jesus falls silent on the cross, a soldier is pacing to and fro at the foot of the cross, waiting to finish his duty, a skull at the bottom of the cross laughing (sarcastically) at the whole event as it were, but from a short distance Mary Magdalene looking at the cross like a peacock looking at the rainbow (with hope), and the moon spreading its white umbrella like light peacefully which is the nectar of eternal life!* (360-377)

*Like the child that bears its pain when it sees the face of its mother, like the soldier who does not care for the wound of the battle and fights and dies and becomes the conqueror so is Jesus in his suffering* (297-300). These expressions bring out a fine blend of heroism and yet child-like faith and confidence of the person of Jesus.

28 V.M. Inamdar gives 6 different angles, which could be summarized into these 4. cf. Op.cit., pp. 45-46.

29 Henceforth the numbers in the brackets that appear immediately after the paraphrased (italicized) lines denote the number of the lines in the original text

The horror of the scene of Jesus’ agonizing death (*bhayanaka* and *bhibhatsa rasa*) and his final surrender to God is balanced by four joyful and optimistic similes: *like a young deer that leaps at its mother, like a bird that makes a beeline to the harvest, like the night lamp that diminishes in the daylight and like the lightning that breaks forth from the horizon – Jesus gave up his spirit* (333-340)

Jesus on the cross *is like a helpless quail in the grip of a vulture; and yet like the fruit of immortal nectar hanging there* (288, 291).

The contrasts that are presented in the section below too express such a blend of tragedy and hope.

#### ***d. The Ironies and Contrasts and Their Dhvani***

- The *rajo mathi* (man of passion), Pilate, is contrasted with the *sathva mathi* (man of goodness), Jesus (26-27).
- Self-interested Pilate and self-giving Jesus.
- Jesus as messenger of love and compassion and the merciless way of death meted out to him.
- *Pilate seated on the golden throne* is likened to *the ancient serpent* (cf. Gen 3,1) *that is sitting coiled on the tree of knowledge but is unable to taste* (comprehend) *its fruit* (11-12).
- Jews who swore by their Law are made to say – *our poor Law is not sufficient to penalize the one who has rebelled against the emperor* (115-116).
- *Would we have asked your law to protect our religion? Would we have begged you to put us under your umbrella?*(167-168). The poet powerfully brings about an irony, perhaps similar to that which we find in the Johannine passion narratives.
- When Pilate asked Jesus: *are you the king of the Jews?* *Jesus replies softly like conscience: you said it* (120 – 123). It is Pilate’s own conscience as it were. Jesus says it softly but since it is the voice of the conscience there is a certain sharpness and strength hidden in the softness.
- Pilate, the representative of the “almighty” Caesar, yet the one who has lost his freedom to the Jews; Jews pleading to

be helpless before Pilate but actually reducing Pilate to a puppet; Jesus standing before Pilate helplessly yet Pilate has no understanding at all of the real nature of the prisoner before him; Mary Magdalene – *the Cleopatra and Helena, the one who has won over the Jews and foreigners alike, yet the one who has renounced and has become a slave of Jesus* (55-65) and Pilate's own confusion about it.

- The helpless Pilate making a fatal compromise with justice under pressure and trying to calm his conscience by washing his hands, and the Jews that have no idea of what it means to call upon the blood of an innocent man upon themselves and their children.

All these depictions create a whirlwind of ironies conveying a total picture that reduces the mighty of the world to puppets of wax and reveal the real material of the helpless innocent ones. No wonder Jesus pleads with tremendous inner strength: *father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing* (305-306).

#### ***e. Expressions of Special Effects***

- Some critics have suggested that devoting four of his poems to the last days of Jesus, Buddha, Krishna and Mahatma Gandhi is intended first of all to portray, in an effective way, "the culmination of a lifetime's mission, a fulfillment, tragically or otherwise, of all that they had stood and worked for in their dedicated lives". Secondly, the poet seems to have found the portrayal of the last day as an effective device to maintain the unity between the person and his message. For both of these are revealed most vividly in the culmination of life (death). And thirdly, a subject like "last day" or "one day" gives a certain heightened concentration to the whole depiction packing it with great force.<sup>30</sup>

- *The cock having crowed thrice became silent like the conscience of the Jews who tried to kill Jesus* (1-3).

- *Like the clouds that imprison the sun and offer it to the night (darkness), the Jews arrested Jesus and took him to Pilate the representative of Caesar* (11-15).

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30 All these 3 points are from V. M. Inamdar, Op.cit., p. 39.



- *Laughing, insulting, spitting, beating,... blood that comes out looks as if a sunrise of love or like a mute witness to this innocent man* (249-250).

- The depiction of the scene at Golgotha when Jesus reached there carrying his cross is full of powerful imagery: *It is full moon on a Friday in Spring; being midday, yet there is no sign of the sun; there are only famished clouds* (clouds that do not cause rain) *spread as if eclipsing even the clouds of deluge of the time of Noah; unbearable heat; the earth is suffocating without any breeze; not even the leaves of the trees shake; there is not even the breath of birds; people come out like a python coming out from its hot hiding place, and gather at Galgotha* (271-282)

- The helplessness and the agony of the crucified Jesus is depicted very vividly: *like a quail that is held by a vulture, like an arrow held straight on the bow, like the moon that is captured by the sea, like bitten by thousand scorpions at once; and yet like the fruit of immortal nectar hanging.* (288-291, 296)

- The scene of the death of Jesus is depicted as: *darkness covers the sky. It covers like the last curtain on the tragic drama of death. Is it the dark of rain or the rain of darkness? Like the dark smoke coming out of the celestial volcano; is it the ninth plague of Egypt? How come in the third watch of the day the light failed? Everybody is frightened* (315-324).

- The depiction of Jesus' final surrender to God is beautifully brought out with apt imagery: *It is like the young deer jumping at its mother, like the bird that flies towards the harvest, like night lamp that disappears in the sunlight, like the lightening that explodes from the horizon.* (332-336).

- Jesus is like the Jordan and his rejection by the Jews is like *this river ending up in the Dead Sea.* However, such an end has its own glorious character: even the Dead Sea is rejuvenated by the Jordan (Ezk 47, 7-12). Such is the relationship between Jesus and the Jews. He is the *sudhasindhu* (the river of nectar) (97-98).<sup>31</sup>

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31 E. Noronha, op.cit., pp. 49-50.

- The death of Jesus is followed by a barrage of cosmic and natural events which are depicted to create the special effect that speaks of the speciality of the person of Jesus: *the earth trembled as the death-trumpet that announced the sad news, the Roman centurion got down from his horse, laid off his helmet and exclaimed "this is truly the Son of God"* (341-346) Typically the contrasting imagery is brought in immediately: *gradually the darkness disappeared, young breeze blew, the cock coming out of its cage crowed as it would crow at the dawn; birds came out in groups from their nests; sheep returned home as if panicked while grazing; sun rose in the west, but seeing the 'flag of the dharma' on the cross (Jesus) it went down; the people gathered there returned home in silence like flocks of cranes from the coast of darkness...there is no sound ... everything is silent* (346-359)

- The lines 359 and 377 bring out an extraordinary, transcendental dimension of the death of Jesus in a dramatic way. The sudden stop depicted in 359 (*saddilla sulivilla* = there is absolute silence everywhere) and in 377 (*ethalum shantham* = it is peaceful everywhere) which comes as a stark contrast to the otherwise freely (and with good speed) flowing scene creates a new expectation beyond death.

### 3. Various Jesuological and Christological Themes Present in the Poem

Given the ambiguous position of the poet with regard to his faith-commitment in relation to Jesus Christ, it is important to distinguish the Jesuological themes from the Christological ones. The former articulate a mere admiration for the man Jesus, whereas the latter see something more than the mere human in Jesus, to which professing faith in his resurrection is central.

#### a. Significant Jesuological Themes and Titles

*The dove among the vultures* (70), *Son of Man* (?) (71), *beauty of the ever beautiful* (28-29), *self-realized* (77), *pure-hearted* (78), *the one who is grazing in the meadow of knowledge* (79-80), *the moonshine* (83), *sea of love* (84), *man of undefected and total celibacy* (88), *the mirror* (90), *helpless like a separated sheep in the midst of a group of wolves* (228), *a small cuckoo that is pecked*

by a group of crows (252), like gold that is roasted in the embers (253), like the Venus covered with clouds (254), like the tree that gives shade to those who fell it (303). Forgetting his own pain because of the great concern he has for the others he said: Forgive for they do not know what they do (305-306). His appearance is like the smile of a woman, with man's insight into the future - both feminine and masculine in Jesus (74-75). The softness of the woman's heart but the determination of the man. The caressing affection of the mother and strictness (with concern) of the father (76-77).

Clearly, the person of Jesus is portrayed as the one who is good and compassionate to all but suffers so helplessly at the hands of merciless tormentors.

### ***b. Significant Christological Themes and Titles***

If he has assumed human condition isn't it natural for him to have pain (294-295)?; Son of God (6, 92, 316 – the poet uses this title here on his own and does not quote scriptures), redeemer of the world (71), world is his house, salvation his daily chore (43), he is *sathva mathi* (as opposed to *rajo mathi* Pilate), truth incarnate, lamb that bears the sin of the world, world's redeemer (vs 75, 85), ladder between heaven and earth (78-79), "hane baraha" (destiny, logos?) of all creation (80), humanly divine (96-97), river of nectar (97), that flows in to the dead sea (98). He hanging on the cross is like the fruit of nectar that hangs on the tree of death (291) (salvific significance of the death of Jesus). His mission is to lift the sinners from sin; to liberate the world from the weight of sin – he is the only one who can do this (44-45).

Mary Magdalene is depicted as the "cock that announces the new message of the sun of David's race" (369-370). This phrase hints at a positive reality that lies beyond Jesus' death.

As it can be noted, many of these Christological themes correspond well with those found in the Biblical texts.

### **4. Cross-textual Reading? Interreligious Dialogue?**

"Golgotha" does not exhibit any traces of Govinda Pai's cross-textual reading practice. However, in order to do justice to his deep respect for non-Hindu religions and his broadmindedness in matters

religious, we need to look at some of his other poems. One such poem is "Yesu-Krishna" (Jesus-Krishna). In this poem he juxtaposes several similar or analogous incidents from the lives of Jesus and Krishna.<sup>32</sup> He then queries:

Isn't *yadunatha* (Krishna) *yoodhanatha* (King of the Jews – Jesus)? Times expire (change) but you remain the same, days may be different but the sun (who makes them) is the same – just so, can we see differences in one God? Whenever *dharma* is on the decline and *adharma* begins to rule, you come.<sup>33</sup>

One could perhaps critique his rash comparisons and untenable historicization of the religious narratives. One could even disagree with his inclusivistic attitude in these verses. However one does not fail to see his deeper insight. One could perhaps meaningfully read all these comparisons from the perspective of the line at the end of the verse cited above, which is taken from the Bhagavad Gita (namely, God's redemptive involvement in the world). From this point of view, religious narratives from different traditions that speak of God's salvific involvement in the world could strike similar chords in a contemplative heart. Govinda Pai's comparison between Jesus and Krishna should be seen from this perspective.<sup>34</sup>

32 For instance: birth of Jesus in the Manger and birth of Krishna in prison; flight to Egypt in the case of Jesus and flight of the father of Krishna (Vasudeva) along with the child to protect him from King Kamsa who sought to kill him; Krishna lived in Dwaraka to avoid the troubles and Jesus had to live in Egypt for some time to avoid Herod; Krishna's friendship with Radha and that of Jesus with Mary Magdalene; Krishna branded as a thief and Jesus crucified in between two thieves; Jesus preaching that "Kingdom of God is within you" and the fact that Bhagavad Gita reverberates *within many a heart*; Transfiguration of Jesus and yet being sold for thirty silver pieces, and Krishna's revelation to Arjuna as the Lord of all the worlds and yet being the son of an ordinary woman, etc.

33 Govinda Pai, *Gilivindu*, Kavyalaya publ., Mysore, first publ. 1930, second publ. 1962., pp. 40-42.

34 S. Havanur, op.cit. p.60.



## 5. Hermeneutical Issues in the Poem

### i. Not "faithful" to the Biblical/Gospel Narratives

Non-Christian critics of *Golgotha* in general hold that Govinda Pai is faithful to the NT text in his poem.<sup>35</sup> However, E. Noronha (Christian) has pointed out that the text of the poem is not faithful to all the details of the passion narratives found in the gospels. The poet himself at times acknowledges his own lack of fidelity to the NT text in the footnotes.<sup>36</sup>

### Examples of Distortions and Mix-Ups, Their *dhvani* Effects and Implications

1. There is no reference in the NT to the following lines found in *Golgotha*: *cock crowing thrice during the trial of Jesus* (1)<sup>37</sup>; *Jews not willing to enter Pilate's court for fear of defilement send message to Pilate through servants* (18). Pilate's soliloquies, such as – *why should this carpenter give up his job and proclaim a new religion?*(29); *In case Jesus is set free and thereby Pilate loses favour with the emperor, how would that affect the glory of the Roman Empire?; the reputation of Romans as the world conquerors?; the fame of the Romans that they are born to rule? How will they make my (Pilate's) name immortal in history?* (200-205); *Jesus proclaimed that to overcome sin and have communion with God there is no other way but fasting and contemplation* (29,36); *Pilate laughing and asking Jesus "What is truth?"* (133-134); *Jews' plea that the Roman law should protect their religion* (167); *Only Mary Magdalene is mentioned as sitting at a little*

35 L. S. Sheshagiri Rao points out that Govinda Pai has omitted certain NT details but not added anything new. op.cit., p.36.

36 For instance he says that though gospels say that the dead bodies were removed from the crosses before the Sabbath could begin at sunset, in the poem one finds the body of Jesus on the cross even after the moonrise. This he says should be understood as *kavi samaya* (poet's time). Cf. 34<sup>th</sup> endnote in the original text of "Golgotha".

37 In Mt 26,74; Lk 22,60; Jn 18,27 report cock crowing just once after Peter has denied Jesus three times. Only Mk 14,72 has cock crowing the second time after Peter had denied Jesus thrice.

*distance from the cross* (367), whereas the gospels include Mary the mother of Jesus among the women at the cross.<sup>38</sup>

2. *Jesus* is compared to the *fruit of the tree of eternal life* and *Pilate* to the *serpent* of Gen 3,1, who fails to taste (comprehend) the fruit (21-24). The comparison clearly moves away from the biblical contexts in which these four subjects and the relationship between some of them are found. But interestingly the effect of such a “distortion” remains well within the biblical semantic axes: *Jesus* is personified eternal life and one who does not know him can live only as the serpent – foolish and yet deceitful and destructive. Further, by referring to the “legendary” serpent, the primeval conflict between good and evil is once again made to provide a setting within which the moral status (mutually opposite) of *Pilate* and *Jesus* are located.<sup>39</sup> Some critics have opined that such a depiction should be seen more as giving a holistic semantic environment rather than referring to one particular detail in the Bible.<sup>40</sup>

3. There is no reference in the NT to a *laughing skull at the foot of the cross* (360-361); a *soldier moving to and fro with a lance in his hand and waiting to finish his duty* (362-365); *Jesus’ body on the cross till the moonrise* (372); *Mary Magdalene sitting all alone at a short distance* (367) etc. This distortion depicts optimism and hope right in the thick of an apparent victory of darkness over light.<sup>41</sup> In fact the depiction of the death scene has two sharp contrasts: it begins with a pessimistic note (*with a skull laughing at the foot of the cross sarcastically and a tired soldier waiting for the end of his watch*). But with the depictions of *Mary Magdalene looking at the cross with great hope like a peacock that awaits the rainbow or like the cock that announces a new message of dawn*; mentioning of *moon that spreads its light on the crucified like a white umbrella, and the surrounding peaceful atmosphere*,

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38 Cf. E. Noronha, Op.cit., pp. 37-50.

39 L. S. Sheshagiri Rao. Op.cit. p.36.

40 E. Noronha, op.cit. p.48.

41 L. S. Sheshagiri Rao. Op.cit. p.41.

etc. (360-377) the poem ends on a strong optimistic note. The "distortions" in the poem nevertheless bring about a faithful depiction of the hope beyond the death of Jesus that is so intrinsic to NT death and resurrection narratives.

4. In addition to the above, E. Noronha has pointed out a few more "distortions".<sup>42</sup> I shall present them (texts in italics) below with some critical remarks.

*a. Govinda Pai does not seem to have referred to the koine text of the NT as his source.*

The poet has composed a poem and not a "scientific" thesis. The main aim of the poem seems to be to present the story of the death of Jesus evocatively (poem is for a transformative purpose) and not to reproduce accurately textual details (for an informative purpose). Hence one could question the relevance of this critique.

*b. Modern practice of respecting the theological frameworks of each Evangelist in understanding and interpreting their texts does not appear in the poem.*

This point has an important relevance. Instead of seeing the canonical gospels as depicting a coherent story of Jesus (cf. the foreword to the poem), if the poet had somehow introduced the theological frameworks of each Evangelist, his poetic text would have been much richer and more complex.

*c. The poet has not paid sufficient attention to the significance of Jesus' life and deeper meaning of his preaching. Jesus is rather seen as a common religious reformer, who preached a radical version of the general moral norms.*

Perhaps the poet has not fully grasped the Christian significance of Jesus' life and deeper meaning of his preaching. He could not possibly do it to the extent that he did not share the Christian tradition. However it is difficult to ignore those sections of the poem (as pointed out in section 3b. above) where he brings out such aspects of the significance of the person and life of Jesus that a Christian considers central to his/her faith.

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42 E. Noronha, op.cit., pp. 37-50.

d. *Though the poet has used titles such as "Devathmajatha" (born of God's Spirit) (7), "Devakumara" (Son of God) (92) to Jesus, there is no reference to them in the foreword (indicating that such titles may not have had any personal significance for the poet)*

To be sure, Govinda Pai did not explicitly profess Christian faith, as it becomes clear from his biographical studies. However, it is not possible to say that he was completely indifferent to the person of Jesus. As pointed out earlier, all his literary productions were the outcome of him being deeply touched by the respective subjects of his compositions.

e. *Some of the original depictions have been distorted in the poem. For instance the courageous personality of Jesus does not really come out in the poem, when he is depicted as having the smile of a woman, a woman's heart etc. (74-76). Upon being asked by Pilate whether he was king of the Jews, Jesus answers with a feeble voice (as one that is of the conscience) "you said it" (121-123). NT accounts do not give any indication that Jesus was weak and feeble when brought before Pilate.*

These two points of critique do not seem to be doing justice either to the poem or to the NT passion narratives. First of all, in the poem the feeble voice of Jesus with which he answers Pilate is likened to the voice of the conscience. In this way the poet depicts the strength of that "feeble" voice in a very effective way. Coming to the second point of the critique, the full text of the poem reads: *He has a masculine sight that pierces the future with the eye that has a feminine smile; his is a masculine, strong will with a woman's tenderness; mother's fondness with father's loving strictness* (74-77). The poet's tendency to straightjacket what is "masculine" and "feminine" can be critiqued. But it would not be an exaggeration to say that such expressions as these bring out the total NT portrayal of the person of Jesus more effectively than any particular NT narrative!

f. *In the depiction of the poem "the last day of Jesus" is restricted to what is commonly known as "Good Friday". But the Christian significance of the "Good Friday" cannot be*



*restricted to this day. If the "last day" has to connote a "climax" then the Resurrection of Jesus cannot be separated from the "last day". It is here that the poet has failed to capture the theological and pietistic faith dimensions of Christian faith in his poem.*

It is true that there is no explicit reference to the resurrection of Jesus in the poem. Secondly, having restricted himself to a literal interpretation of the NT convention, that the Resurrection of Jesus took place on the "third day", the poet could not possibly include that day in his depiction of the "last day". However it is quite clear in the poem that the "last day" for the poet though at one level is a temporal concept, he nevertheless does not fail to bring out its deeper meaning as the climax of life. In this context, as noted in the earlier sections above, the depictions of the more than human qualities of Jesus and those of hope and optimism beyond his tragic death are very vividly brought out right through the poem.

## **ii. Poet's Faithfulness to NT**

The poet has depicted most of the details of the NT passion narratives faithfully in his poem. That the passion and death of Jesus has salvific significance for the world is one of the main themes in the NT Christologies. This idea is faithfully brought out in the poem right at the beginning of the trial scene by depicting *cool breeze proclaiming the settling of the debt of sin of the world and blowing of the trumpet by angels announcing the return of the Son of God* (6-9). Further, as E. Noronha has pointed out the line 143 (Pilate: *Is this Jesus called Christ?*) echoes the Christian faith profession: Jesus is the Saviour (Christ) of the world.<sup>43</sup>

This indicates that the poet, though diverting from the details of the NT text, has nevertheless remained faithful to some of its major Christological themes in his poem.

Do the "distortions" betray the poet's ignorance or lack of careful reading of the gospel narratives? Or are they deliberate? Is it possible that the poet's experience and/or intentions could not be adequately articulated if he had remained absolutely faithful to the letter of the

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43 Ibid., p.48.

canonical texts? If we opt for this last possibility we become aware of a unique theologizing process in the composition of the poem. It is analogous to the process in which the Bible was formed (for that matter texts of any religious tradition): The main interest of the biblical redactors was not to give historical or biographical details; nor even to scrupulously reproduce the sources available to them; but to redact and re-present sources from a particular (theological) point of view, which they did in the light of their faith experience.

Seen in this light Govinda Pai seems to be redacting the gospel passion narratives from a particular point of view (theological or otherwise). It is hard to be blind to his own understanding of the person of Jesus Christ and his historical circumstances that have shaped his point of view. He clearly sees the towering personality of Jesus right in the midst of his apparent helplessness, and wants to bring out the significance of the cruel death of such a person. In this context questioning the poet's faithfulness to the textual details of the gospel narratives is analogous to questioning the faithfulness of the NT authors/redactors to the historical details and/or the details (textual or oral) of the sources related to Jesus Christ that were available to them. Albeit, we do acknowledge the difference: the poet cannot possibly be considered "inspired" as a Christian would consider a biblical author or redactor was. However the recognition of 'distortions' pave the way towards unearthing the author's interests and perspectives. That seems to be a hermeneutically fruitful exercise: A contextualized understanding of the canonical texts is not only possible and desirable but is the only way to remain faithful to their message. The "distortions" introduced by Govinda Pai point towards a direction in which such contextual understanding and narration can be practiced. This leads us to the next consideration: semantic autonomy of the text and the issue of the reader's concerns entering into the act of reading.

### *iii. Implications of Affirming the Semantic Autonomy, of the Text and the Role of Reader's Concern in the Reading Act*

Both these factors are interrelated. The fact of the reader's concerns entering into the reading act can be justified only when the semantic autonomy of the text is recognized and affirmed, which in turn comes to the fore in a dialogue with the reader's concerns.

Albeit, this dialogue should not take place completely independent of the author’s intentions. Govinda Pai, as we already noted above, is more faithful to the message of the NT text (author’s intention) than to its letter. He then allows the text to speak for itself, thereby respecting its autonomy, and on the other hand encounters the text with his specific concerns (mentioned in section 1 above). The result is a contextual understanding and a contextual narration of the text. No wonder, then, the poem has been very effective in telling the story of Jesus to a typically Kannada audience, Christian and non-Christian alike. G. P. Rajarathnam cites an occasion where after a public recital of “Golgotha” a Hindu seemed to have approached him and asked him not to recite it anywhere in public because of its strong appeal that could further help the “conversion” work of the missionaries.<sup>44</sup> He also reports an occasion when after listening to a public recital of “Golgotha” a Christian priest seemed to have inquired whether the poet was a Christian!<sup>45</sup> As noted earlier the genius of the poet is seen in his ability to locate the poem in an overall Biblical world, and at the same time soak it with the type of imagery and style of narration that can deeply impress his intended audience.

## Conclusion

“Golgotha” points at a way of telling the story of Jesus in a contextualized manner. Such a venture is by no means anything new. The story of Jesus was contextually narrated right from the early decades of Christianity. Albeit, every contextual narration may not be equally acceptable to a particular audience. But a classic that the NT narrative is demands contextual retelling because of its potential to speak afresh in many contexts. Such potential should not be stifled in a bid to remain “faithful” to all the textual details. Indeed it is this potential of a classic that can make even the stones shout out despite all the efforts to silence it (cf. Lk 19,40). The story of Jesus, a classic par excellence, indeed has been creating powerful ripples in many a heart. A poet like Govinda Pai has given an effective expression to such ripples in his “Golgotha”. It is evident that such expressions can

44 G. P. Rajarathnam, op.cit. p.49.

45 Ibid.

only make the story of Jesus Christ intelligible across cultures. The uniqueness of “Golgotha” is that while the NT story of Jesus as such is kept largely intact, it is contextualized by means of using apt imagery, metaphors, similes and comparisons. In this sense “Golgotha” exhibits one of the several possible ways of doing contextual Christologies.

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# Christology in the Writings of Narayan Vaman Tiliak (1861 – 1919)

Nelson Falcao

Narayan Vaman Tilak (1861-1919), a Marathi Christian poet, was convinced that the Christian Gospel needed to be communicated to Indians in Indian spiritual expressions and forms. He composed many hymns and poems which are still sung even today. In order that the Christians may have their own Purāna on Jesus Christ he started composing the Christāyana.. He knew well that if Christian ideas are expressed in Indian spiritual forms, Indian Christianity would become more congenial to the Indian spirit. He accepted and practiced Bhakti Mārga as the most suitable way of knowing God. Tilak experienced Christ as the Great Mother and the Perfect Guru. He combined these two experiences and developed the idea of Christ as Mother-Guru (*Guru-Mauli*). He promoted singing of Bhajans, reciting Kirtans and the reading of the Purānas. Following the tradition of great Marathi poet-saints like Tukaram he composed *Abhangas* which expressed his deep Christic experience.

Narayan Vaman Tilak was born in 1862 at Karazgaon, in Ratnagiri in Maharashtra. He was born in a Chitpavan Brahmin family. As a registrar, his father Vamanrao was in-charge of many villages. Due to such a type of work his father was away from his family most of the time. Narayan was brought up by his mother, Janakbhai. His natural talent in poetry he inherited from his mother Janakibai. While he loved his mother, his relationship with his father was rather hostile. But Tilak lost his mother when he was just eleven. After the mother's death, Tilak left his father and began life on his own. His later

opposition to orthodox Hinduism was probably his reaction to his father's barren and superstitious orthodoxy.<sup>1</sup>

Tilak kept up with his education. He studied Sanskrit under the guidance of the famous Vedic scholar Ganesh Shastri Hele. He won prizes for elocution and oratory. He learnt English by memorizing the dictionary. In order to support himself he took up various jobs. He acquired fluency in Marathi, Sanskrit and English. He married Lakshmibai, a girl of eleven when he was eighteen years old. Since his wife was young, he left her with her relatives. For the next ten years he wandered. By giving speeches, Kirtaans and recitation of Puranic stories, he earned his living.<sup>2</sup>

### **Quest for a Perfect Religion**

Narayan, during this part of his life, experienced a spiritual unrest. His pursuit of the study of different religious ideas and philosophies of India was very ardent. He developed a broad and tolerant view of life. He openly opposed the caste system and oppression of the poor. He loved his country and wanted its progress. But he was convinced that India's prosperity had to be based on religion. And so he started his search for the ideal religion. He prepared philosophical foundations for his new religion. They were as follows:

1 ) The Creator of the world is some particular, personal Spirit, who regards all humankind as his Children.

2) All scriptures are the work of human beings, and there is only one book giving knowledge of God and that book is the world.

3 ) There is no such thing as former births and reincarnations. The sorrows and joys of humans are depended on human heredity, one's own spirit, and one's attitude towards one's duty in society.

4 ) Faith in God and brotherhood of all humans on this earth is the essence of all religions.

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1 Cf Hans Staffner, *Dialogue Stimulating Contacts with Hindus*, (Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1993), p.157.

2 Cf Laxmibai Tilak and Devdatt Tilak, *Sampūrṇa Smṛticitr*, (Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1989), pp. 39-224.

5) There is no sin equal to idol worship, but such virtues as love, truth, mercy may be personified and worshipped.<sup>3</sup>

He realized that his idea of the new religion was best realized in Christianity. From then on it was his conviction to lead India to Christ.<sup>4</sup>

During the years of his search for truth, once, during a train journey he met a European who impressed Tilak by his loving ways. He gave him a copy of the New testament. On reading the New Testament, he was impressed by the Sermon on the Mount and its words of love and compassion. He discovered Jesus Christ and found him to be the guru, the goal of his spiritual pursuit.<sup>5</sup> Tilak was baptized on February 10, 1895. His wife and family tried to get Tilak back to Hinduism but they did not succeed. After five years his wife and son joined him and were baptized. His wife became a devoted Christian, guide and counselor to Tilak. He performed his missionary activities in the Ahmednagar region with American Marathi Mission for twenty-one years. He taught in the Ahmednagar Theological Seminary. He was ordained in 1904 and helped in the ministry. He contributed to Marathi literature through his writings. He helped Pandita Ramabai in her translation of the New Testament. He was known for his literary talent and won the Natya Sammelan, the highest honour offered by the literary world of Maharashtra.

Tilak was patriotic. After twenty years of service in the mission, he felt God is calling him to be an Indian Apostle of Christ. He was much influenced by Tukaram, a poet saint of Maharashtra. He wished to make the Indian church more Indian by introducing Indian cultural elements in worship, theology and activities.

### **Tilak's Abhangas<sup>6</sup>**

Tilak searched and hoped for Indigenous Christianity. It was through his Abhangas that Tilak introduced Indian cultural elements into Christian worship. Understanding Hinduism had helped his

3 Laxmibai Tilak, *I Follow After*, (London: 1950), p. 124.

4 Cf Hans Staffner, *Dialogue Stimulating Contacts with Hindus*, p.160.

5 Cf Hans Staffner, *Dialogue Stimulating Contacts with Hindus*, p.159.

6 Abhanga is the metre in which Tukaram wrote his poetry

understanding of Christianity. He took pride in Indian literature and in Indian Mahatmas. Tukāṛām and Jñāneśwara were once his gurus. The Hindu mystics conceived and Hindu devotees experienced the traditional way of union with the Supreme through Bhakti. This union through Bhakti is summed up by Tilak in four words: Samipata (nearness), Salokata (association), Sarupta (likeness) and Sayujyta (yokedness, union). The experience of union with the Supreme through Bhakti helped Tilak to enter into the meaning of a series of Christ's sayings: "Come after me," "Take my yoke upon you," "Become like unto me," "Abide in me," and so on.

Tilak found that the Marathi Abhangas moved him from other worldliness to a meaningful world where humans could enrich their souls. He believed that the Abhangas gave meaning to one's daily life.<sup>7</sup>

### **Tilak's Poetical Activity**

Tilak's poetical activity could possibly be divided into four periods:

- First Period upto 1895) in the poems written before Tilak's acceptance of Christianity, influenced by his study of Sanskrit poetry;
- Second Period (1895 – 1900) in poems devoted to flowers and children;
- Third Period ( 1900 - 1912) in poems on the traditional devotional themes;
- Fourth Period (1912 – 1919) – religious poetry, hymns and religious songs;

Abhanganjali is his famous collection of religious poetry. In this period he attempted to write a life of Christ in verse form which he called Christāyan, but unfortunately he died before its completion. His wife Lakshmibai completed it. As a Christian poet-saint of Maharashtra, Tilak through his Abahangas reached the height of fulfillment of his mission.

### **Tilak's Understanding of God**

Tilak not only accepted the basic elements of the Christian concept

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7 Cf Laxmibai Tilak and Devdatt Tilak, *Sampūrṇa Smṛṭicitr*, pp. 478-484.



of God but also took a step forward towards making the Christian idea of God more acceptable to the Indian mind. Tilak recognized God as the Father who is full of loving kindness. He affirmed that we, as his children, should trust in him. For the frail and weak children of humanity the Fatherhood of God is a great source of comfort. However, he realized that the concept of God's Fatherhood alone was inadequate in the Indian cultural context where the mother is considered an embodiment of love, self-sacrifice, kindness, care and emotional attachment. And so he added a new dimension to the understanding of the love of God. To the designations of authority, chastisement and commitment to the love of a father, he added the attributes of unconditional, tender and sacrificial love of a mother.

Tilak gave an integrated vision of God and life. Life is an emission of love and love is God himself. Through the Bhakti tradition Tilak experienced God as the inseparable companion of life. In every moment of his life he experienced the presence of God. As a Christian devotee, Tilak found the fullness of God in all humans. God dwells in humans. He is the heart of hearts. The body is the temple of God. According to Tilak God exists in all things. If only we learn to see and listen to him, God is very close to us in this world and is in every event and in everything. Thus, in his understanding the nature of God, he tried to bring about a reconciliation between the transcendental nature of God and the temporal relation of God with the world.

### **Christ, the Mother-Guru**

Tilak's goal as a Bhakta was, union with Christ. He strived to have an uninterrupted communion with Christ. According to him Christ was not a theological concept but rather a deep experience of reality. Amidst sickness, sorrow and physical hardship, he experienced spiritual elation in Christ. In him he found perfect peace and rest of his soul.

Christ seeks to dwell in the heart of every human, at the center of one's being. He asks permission to be a tenant knocking at the door of the heart of each devotee. In several of his hymns and poems, Tilak presented the idea of Christ wanting to dwell in the heart of his devotees.

Tilak was attracted by the transforming power of Christ. Christ transforms the earthly life into a heavenly abode when a devotee

fully surrenders himself or herself to Christ. His presence takes away all cares and gives permanent rest, when Christ is with a devotee. A great transformation in a devotee's existence, nature and character is brought about through Christ's presence. A devotee becomes a new being in Christ and the old self is taken away.

Tilak experienced Christ as the Great Mother. A devotee in his/her relationship with Christ, experiences all fine qualities of a beloved Mother in and through Christ. Tilak was an earnest seeker after spiritual enlightenment, and found it in Christ the perfect Guru. Thus he experienced Christ as the Great Mother and the Guru. He combined these two experiences and developed the idea of Christ as Mother-Guru (*Guru-Mauli*), the Guru with a difference. He expressed his devotion to Christ, the Mother-Guru in one of his poems:

*Tenderest Mother-Guru mine  
Saviour, Where is love like Thine?  
A cool and never-fading shade  
To souls by sin's fierce heat dismayed:  
Right swiftly at my earliest cry  
He came to save me from the sky:  
He made him friends of those who mourn  
With hearts by meek contrition torn:  
For me, a sinner, yea, for me  
He hastened to the bitter Tree:  
And still within me living too,  
He fills my being through and through.  
My heart is all one melody –  
'Hail to Thee, Christ! all hail to Thee. <sup>8</sup>*

Tilak experienced the ecstasy of union with Christ, as a follower of the Bhakti tradition. He desired to experience an inseparable union with Christ. He narrates his relationship with Christ through various images and symbols used for both Christ as flute and devotee as the

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8 Cited in R. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2004), p. 115.

breath, Christ as Mother and devotee as her baby, Christ as the Guide and devotee as a lost traveler. Through such imageries he tried to reveal that a devotee cannot do without Christ, the Guru. Christ and devotee remain together and make a harmonious whole.<sup>9</sup>

### **Conversion: No Separation from Hindu Community**

For Tilak conversion does not imply separation from the Hindu community. He wanted to make it clear that by becoming a Christian he did not want to separate himself from his Hindu brethren. Through his example he showed to all that a Hindu converted to Christianity need not separate himself from the Hindu community.<sup>10</sup>

### **Conversion: No Renouncing of Hindu Religious Heritage**

It was a strong conviction of Tilak that India's spiritual heritage is of great importance for expressing Indian Christianity. He knew well that if Christian ideas are expressed in Indian spiritual forms, Indian Christianity would become more congenial to the Indian spirit. According to him, the spiritual fervour of the devotion of the Marathi saints to Viṭhobhā at Pandharpur was a preparation for the reception of the Christian Gospel. He was convinced that the Christian Gospel needed to be communicated to Indians in Indian spiritual expressions and forms. He accepted and practiced Bhakti Mārga as the most suitable way of knowing God. He accepted Christ as the visible form of God and rendered unfailing devotion to him. Tilak also made use of the Indian spiritual heritage of Yoga as an appealing spiritual technique. He presented Christ as the Lord of Yoga. Through the concept of yoga, he tried to unify his physical and psychic energy to serve Christ.<sup>11</sup>

### **Need of a Genuinely Indian Church**

Tilak was convinced of the fact that Christianity could not spread in India as long as it came dressed in foreign garb. He wrote: "If Christ could be presented to India in his naked beauty, free from the disguises of western organization, western doctrines and western

9 Cf Laxmibai Tilak and Devdatt Tilak, *Sampūrṇa Smṛticitre*, pp. 501-507.

10 Cf Laxmibai Tilak and Devdatt Tilak, *Sampūrṇa Smṛticitre*, pp. 222-224

11 Cf Laxmibai Tilak and Devdatt Tilak, *Sampūrṇa Smṛticitre*, pp. 222-224.

forms of worship, India would acknowledge him as the supreme guru and lay her richest homage at His feet.”<sup>12</sup>

### Promoting Indian Forms of Divine Service

Tilak promoted singing of Bhajans, reciting Kirtans and the reading of the Purāṇas. His wife became a Kirtankar. He put life into the dry and barren divine worship of the Marathi Christian community. He composed many hymns which are still sung even today. In order that the Christians may have their own Purāṇa on Jesus Christ he started composing the Christāyana, just as the Hindus have their Ramayana. He was able to completed only 11 Cantos. The rest of the Cantos up to 74 were completed by his wife Laxmibai and the last one 75<sup>th</sup> Canto was completed by their son Devadat.<sup>13</sup>

### Darbār of God

Twenty months before he died, he started a movement called ‘Darbār of the Lord Jesus Christ’. This Darbar evolved as a result of his great desire to relate Christianity to India’s spiritual heritage and to find an appropriate way of presenting Christ to Indians. In his Darbar, Tilak presented Jesus Christ as the founder of Swarāja in one’s heart and in the whole world.

Swarāja is the kingdom of Heaven. And the Darbar of the Lord Jesus Christ is an association of people in whose hearts it is already established. The aim of the Darbar was to form a brotherhood of the baptized and the unbaptized disciples of Christ. Since God dwells in all hearts, love and service would be the uniting forces. All human beings are brothers and sisters belonging to the family of God. It was his wish and hope that through the working of the Darbar, Christianity would leave its foreign aspect and become fully Indian.<sup>14</sup>

### Conclusion

A question could be raised: why has Vaman Tilak said and done what he has said/done? Narayan Vaman Tilak was on the look-out

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12 J.C.Winslow, *Narayan Vaman Tilak: The Christian Poet of Maharashtra* (1930), p. 118, cited in Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2004), p.115

13 Cf Laxmibai Tilak and Devdatt Tilak, *Sampūrṇa Smṛticitr*, pp. 478-484.

14 Cf Laxmibai Tilak and Devdatt Tilak, *Sampūrṇa Smṛticitr*, pp. 462-465.



for a spiritual foundation on which the progress of India could be built. And so he searched for an ideal religion. He prepared the philosophical foundations of his new religion. He even hoped to evolve a religion so that all the nations of the world could be united in one brotherhood and in one spirit. He soon found his idea of the ideal religion realized in Christianity beyond his expectations. And he was then on convinced of the fact that for the progress of India Christ's teaching was a must. He spent the rest of his life as a Sadhu dressed in saffron, trying to lead his dear nation to Christ.

What fresh aspects are added by Tilak and how do they contribute to a new Indian understanding of Christ? i) Love and compassion of Christ: He was struck by the Sermon on the Mount and the words found in that Sermon; ii) Bhakti Mārga: He experienced himself and propagated a personal way of having union with Christ the Lord; iii) Abhangas: Through his Abhangas he proposed many Indian expressions, designations and terms; iv) Christ as Guru-Mauli: He presented Christ as the Mother and as the Guru; v) Devotion to Viṭhobā of Pandharpur as preparation for the Gospel: He saw the Varākari movement as a preparation for the Gospel of Christ; vi) Darbār of God: He was convinced that only a brotherhood of Indian Sanyasis could effectively spread the Kingdom of Christ in India; and so he founded the Devācā Darbar.

Tilak's life and ministry are noteworthy efforts to form an indigenous Christianity. He was committed to personal Christ-likeness and the Indian expression of Christian faith. These two aspects continually got deepened throughout his life. The formation of Christ's Darbar, a brotherhood of the baptized and unbaptized disciples of Christ, was the boldest and controversial move on his part. The functioning of Darbar was so dependent on Tilak himself that after his death it did not survive. Perhaps, Tilak stressed too much his own role as an apostle. The effort to form an indigenous Christianity has to be a cumulative and communitarian effort.

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# Christ in Gujarati Poetry

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Two categories of poets have written about Christ in Gujarati poetry, namely, Christian poets and non-Christian poets. Both these groups have taken various aspects of Jesus' life and death in their poetic expression. In this article the author presents eight Gujarati poets who have written poems about Christ. One of the earliest poetic expressions about Christ was by the famous Gujarati poet Kavi Kant (1867-1923). It has been pointed out that with Kant, Gujarati literature entered its 'spring' season. Kant was able to combine a sense of tragedy with a deep sense of subjective experience in his poetry. Several poems of Kant reflect his Christian faith, especially his own turmoil and confusion. One of his well known poems 'Endless Love' is about the story of the Prodigal son. The author also gives an overview of the Christian contributions to the Gujarati literature in general and in particular he introduces to the reader the attempts of some poets like Kalapi (Sursinhji Takhsinhji Gohil, 1874-1900), Sundaram (Tribhuvandas Purushottamdas Luhar, 1908-1991, Priyakant Maniyar (1927-1976), Niranjan Bhagat (b. 1926) Yoseph Macwan (b.1940) Philip Clark and Vipin Parekh to express in Gujarati poetry themes related to the life and mission of Jesus Christ.

## Introduction

Literature in a given society can be looked at from different perspectives. If one looks at literature, following the Arnoldian tradition of 'high culture,' then it will be seen as the product of refinement and the embodiment of the best that mind can produce. In this view, literature and art are seen as the expressions of the 'high culture',

which is *the* culture.<sup>1</sup> One can also look at literature in terms of social relationships. If we look at the 'mainstream' literature from the point of view of social relations, then we begin to notice the 'silence' and closure reflected by the exclusion and occlusion of certain groups in a given society. Gujarati mainstream literature reflects such occlusions and exclusions of those of the periphery.

Let me be a little more concrete. From the perspective of Gujarati literature, the theme 'Christ in Gujarati poetry' occupies a marginal space, which is symptomatic of the literary closure. One of the first attempts to bring together Gujarati poems about Christ was done by a well known Catholic poet Yoseph Macwan. In this collection, entitled *Cross ane Kavi* (Cross and the Poet), Mr. Macwan has brought together poems about Christ written by nineteen Gujarati poets.<sup>2</sup> Of these nineteen Gujarati poets, only four are Christian.

This silence and closure need to be located against the background of some historical reasons, of which we may note two. By 'silence' I mean the marginal space occupied by Christians in Gujarati literature. In the first place, Christians – both Catholics and Protestants – form a marginal group in Gujarat. In the second half of the nineteenth century those who responded to Christianity in Gujarat were from the marginal groups. According to the census enumeration of 2001, Christians constitute 0.56 % of the total population. In the public domain – except in the form of some of well known city schools and colleges – the Christian presence can be said to be somewhat marginal. Secondly, in the nineteenth century the elites and intellectuals of Gujarat – a distinct self-conscious group – began to articulate a specific notion of Gujarat, focusing on its history, language and culture. These elites and intellectuals would define and decide the contours of Gujarati *asmita* or identity. In the process of creating a singular and

1 In the nineteenth century Mathew Arnold (1822-1888) popularized the notion of culture as the embodiment of the highest aspiration of humanity. See, Mathew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed., Dover Wilson (first published in 1869. reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) p. 44-45 & p. 48.

2 Yoseph Macwan, ed. *Cross ane Kavi* (Ahmedabad: Gujarat Tract and Book society, 1977)

homogenized Gujarat regional identity several groups were occluded and excluded from the 'core' regional identity. Without going into the historical reasons, it would suffice to say that those who responded to Christianity were among those excluded from this 'core' Gujarati *asmita*. Gujarati literature in the nineteenth century as well as in the twentieth century was a domain which had a virtual domination of the upper-caste Hindu population.<sup>3</sup> The voice of marginalized groups hardly finds an echo in Gujarati literature well up to the 1970s. So when we talk about 'Christ in Gujarati poetry' we need to keep in mind some of these factors.

This article will focus on poems written by Christian poets as well as non-Christian poets.<sup>4</sup> 'Christ in Gujarati poetry' in this article could either mean poems which is written about Christ or poems inspired by the teaching and preaching of Christ. It could also mean poems inspired by the contexts surrounding the life and death of Jesus. This article is divided into 3 parts. The first part sketches all too briefly Christian presence – both Catholic and Protestant – in Gujarat. In the second section, an effort is made to locate Christian presence in the wider Gujarati literature. The third section focuses on the theme, 'Christ in Gujarati Poetry.' Here, both Christian and non-Christian poetic portrayal of Christ in Gujarati poetry will be briefly examined.

### 1. Christian Presence in Gujarat: Mapping the Context

Gujarat has an ancient mercantile tradition and it is not entirely surprising that the first Christian presence in Gujarat coincided with the well known trading centers of Gujarat such as Khambhat, Surat, and Ahmedabad. Catholic presence in Gujarat goes back to the Mughal times. The Portuguese Jesuit missionaries built a church near the fort at Khambhat in 1594. Catholic churches were built also in Surat and Bharuch. From 1640, the Capuchins were active in Surat and they built a Church in that city in 1664. The Carmelites came to Surat

3 V. Sebastian, S. J., "Regional Identity Constructions of Gujarat in Colonial Context: Configurations and Contestations," A paper presented at the National Conference: "Region, Literature, Culture: Issues and Stakes," at the Department of English, Faculty of Arts, the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, March 18, 2008.

4 I am grateful to Sunil Macwan, S. J. and Jagdish Macwan for their help in translating some of the Gujarati poems into English.



in 1669. We need to note that this Christian presence was limited and consisted of mainly foreigners.<sup>5</sup>

The indigenous Catholic communities were established only by the end of the nineteenth century. The very first group to respond to Catholicism was the Vankar community and this was marked by the first baptism in 1891. The opening up of several mission stations provided the basis for the establishment of viable Catholic communities in Gujarat. Against the backdrop of caste prejudices and discrimination, the Jesuit missionaries who were responsible for evangelization in Gujarat provided educational facilities for the newly formed Catholics. In 1914 the Anand Credit Cooperative Society was founded and this Society became the economic backbone of the Christian community in Kheda. The Catholics experienced numerical growth after 1934 under the leadership of Fr. Vilallonga. In 1934 there were about 8,884 Catholics in Kheda and it grew to 26,970 in 1949. For the first time, significant number of tribal communities responded to Catholicism towards the late 1960s and early 1970s. There are Catholic communities among the Gamit, Vasava, Kokana, Dangi, Bhil tribal groups.

The Protestant evangelization began in Gujarat in the first decades of the nineteenth century. The protestant evangelical efforts were closely associated with the British East India Company. Anglican built Churches in Kaira, Baroda Ahmedabad and Surat. The number of Protestants was relatively small in the early decades of the nineteenth century and the Chaplains worked mainly within the boundaries of the British Cantonments. The first Gujarati Protestant Christians were baptized on 26 June, 1831 in Kheda.<sup>6</sup> The Protestant

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5 Apart from these Churches there were other Churches in Gujarat in the 19<sup>th</sup> century mainly associated with the Catholics of the army cantonments and railway departments: Bharuch (1814), Kheda Camp (1818) Ahmedabad-Mirzapur (1856), Ahmedabad-Sabarmati (1882), Deesa Cantonment (1828), Bhuj (1836), Rajkot (1863), Jamnagar (1871), Bhavnagar (1881). Carlos Suria, S. J., "Early Churches in Gujarat," in *Ahmedabad Mission Golden Jubilee Souvenir*, ed. Varghese Paul (Ahmedabad: Catholic Information Centre, 1984) pp.165-178.

6 Robin Boyd, *Church History of Gujarat* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1981) p. 32.

Christian community began to grow numerically only towards the end of the nineteenth century. The Protestants consisted mainly of Irish Presbyterians, Methodists, and Anglicans.

Christian presence in Gujarat needs to mention the great famine of 1900, which is popularly known as *Chhapaniyo*.<sup>7</sup> This is all the more important against the allegations of 'conversion,' by Christian missionaries. Thousands died of hunger and malnutrition during this famine and it had left a deep scar on Gujarat society. "Surprisingly this devastating event found no echo in contemporary mainstream literature and our only sources are British government reports."<sup>8</sup> What is interesting is the attitude of the wealthy and the rich during this famine, as recounted by Bhailalbhai Patel, from his childhood memoirs.<sup>9</sup>

The cities of Gujarat had money during the chhapaniya... There were many wealthy people in the cities but it did not occur to any of them to step in to save people dying from hunger. There were religious godmen in Gujarat, who had become rich with the contributions of farmers and poor people. Yet chhapan bhog was being offered at the Vaishnav havelis and the acharyas continued to enjoy their luxury.

According to Bhailalbhai, "not one dharmaguru had the good sense to keep alive the starving people by generating some work for them." Against this background, Bhailalbhai Patel describes the role played by the Christian missionaries in the midst of such indifferent attitude:

It is very unfortunate that even though they were faced with such a great famine, the well-to-do lovers of the Hindu religion, who profess to believe in *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*, did not think of extending a helping hand... Only the foreign priests believing in a foreign religion felt compassion for the suffering multitude.

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7 The *Chhapaniyo* (fifty-six) famine occurred in the year 1956 of the Vikram Era which is AD 1900.

8 Achyut Yagnik and Suchitra Sheth, *The Shaping of Modern Gujarat: Plurality, Hindutva and Beyond* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2005) p. 136.

9 Bhailalbhai Patel was the founder of the Vallabhvidyanagar University and president of the Swatantra Party in Gujarat.

They begged for funds in Europe and America and used the money to rescue lakhs of people from the jaws of death without a thought of their status or caste. A majority of the Gujarati Christians today are those who survived due to the mercy of these foreign 'paadris' [missionaries]."<sup>10</sup>

In the above quotation, the last sentence of Bhailalbhai may be an overstatement. Speaking about 'Christian presence in Gujarat,' will be incomplete if we do not mention the influence of Jesus and the Bible on Gandhi. Unfortunately, his impression about Christianity was a negative one; initially, it was the evangelical Christianity that he came into contact with. Then there were some stereotypes which affected Gandhi's perception about Christianity which had to do with beef-eating and liquor drinking.<sup>11</sup> In his later life Gandhi had several Christian friends; both Jesus and the Bible left a deep impression on Gandhi's political ideology and social philosophy.

We may note a few historical facts here about the Christian presence in Gujarat. Firstly, the number of Christians remains relatively small. Though small in number, Christian institutions – Schools, colleges, hospitals, and Social Service/Action centers – have contributed significantly towards Gujarati society. Secondly, in the beginning of the twentieth century, there was an uneasy relationship between the Catholic Church and Protestants because of rivalry.<sup>12</sup> Thirdly, Christianity – both Catholicism and Protestantism – did provide marginalized groups a new sense of identity. As Kenneth Jones has pointed, Christianity filled a role similar to that of other religions such as Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Islam which offered those who were at the social and cultural periphery a way to improve their status

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10 Bhailalbhai Patel, *Gamdanun Vastav Darshan* (Vallabhvidyanagar: Charotar Vidyamandal, 1956) pp. 6-8, 18, 19. Quoted by Achyut Yagnik and Suchitra Sheth, *The Shaping of Modern Gujarat: Plurality, Hindutva and Beyond* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2005) pp. 136-138.

11 S. M. K. Gandhi, *The Story of my Experiment with Truth* (Ahmedabad: Navjivan, 1927) p. 85.

12 Robin Boyd, *Church History of Gujarat* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1981) p. 77.

and break away from caste based disabilities.<sup>13</sup> We need to keep in mind some of these historical contexts in order to locate the interpretations of Christ in Gujarati poetry.

## 2. Christian Presence in Gujarati Literature:

### Brief Overview

Incidentally, the very first publication of a Christian book in Gujarati – The Bible – was done in Bengal and not in Gujarat. William Carey of the Serampore Mission had begun the translation of the Bible into several Indian languages. The translation work of the New Testament which was begun in 1808 was completed and published in 1820. In this translation, Carey was assisted by some Pandits. This Gujarati translation was published in Devanagiri script and not in Gujarati Script. This translation was replaced by a better one in 1821 by the London Missionary society in Surat. We need to note that most of the early Christian literature of the first decades of the nineteenth century was made for the use of Christians. These included tracts, catechism, hymnals and Bhajans.<sup>14</sup>

Modern Gujarati literature is in many ways influenced by colonial modernity – and Christianity was in some measure implicated in colonial modernity. Some of the British administrators took a keen interest in the cultural and social life of Gujarat. For example, Alexander Kinloch Forbes, a judge in Ahmedabad, began the *Gujarat Vernacular Society* in 1848 and this society played a key role in the development and publication of Gujarati literature. Forbes also wrote one of the first histories of Gujarat entitled *Raas Mala* in 1850.

One of the famous Gujarati Christian poets who gave poetic articulations about Christ was Manishankar Batt (1867-1923) popularly known as Kavi Kant. After having completed his school studies in Saurashtra, Manishankar joined Elphinstone College,

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13 Kenneth Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1989) pp. 159-60.

14 See, Rev. R. H.S. Boyd, *Gujarati Theological Literature: An Outline History* (Calcutta: An occasional Bulletin of the Theological Education Fund, n.d) pp. 2-26. Reprint from an article in the *Indian Journal of Theology*, vol. 12, nos. 2 & 3.



Bombay. As student, he came in contact with Western thought and poetry, and perhaps most importantly, with the Bible. Manishankar took to poetry writing at this point in time, combining elements of Indian and Western traditions. After studies, he came back to Saurashtra and worked in the Education Department of Bhavnagar State. From his days in Bombay, Christianity fascinated him and in 1898 Manishankar decided to become a Christian. His fellow Nagar Brahmins protested vehemently against his adoption of (Anglican) Christianity. Manishankar went through a great deal of persecution and tension for a considerable period of time. His sufferings became greater when his wife refused to become a Christian. Being a sensitive soul, the separation of his friends was something more than he could cope with. Eventually Kant made a formal *prayascitta* ceremony and got back his caste status. However, his fascination with Christianity remained till the end of his life; he never gave up his faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>15</sup>

His baptism marks a turning point in Kant's life in the sense that it brought about immense struggle to grapple with his own identity. It would appear that Kant was not comfortable with his newly acquired Christian identity. Even after his baptism, he did not have much contact with the organized Church. His social space seems to have played a greater role than his Christian identity. There are some striking similarities between Kant and Brahmabandhab Upadhyay as far as their Christian identities are concerned. Both performed formal *prayascitta* ceremony in order to retain their caste status. Towards the end of their lives, both Kant and Upadhyay did not have much relationship with organized Christianity.

The earliest Catholic literary production, as the case with the Protestants, was for the Catholic community. One of the important steps in the Catholic literature was taken with the establishment of a magazine called *Doot* (Messenger of the Sacred Heart) in 1911. This journal became a spring-board for the Catholic writers to express their literary creativity. In 1940, an organization called *Gujarati*

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15 Ramnarayan Patak, "Upodhyath," in Manishankar Rathnaji Bhatt, *Purvalap* (Mumbai and Ahmedabad: R. R. Shetni Company, 1970) pp. 9-69, here, p. p. 28.

*Catholic Satyaprakash* was started with a view of Catholic publication. Out of these efforts grew the *Gujarat Sahitya Prakash* which has made a good name in the field of publication.<sup>16</sup>

There are some Christians who have made their presence felt in the mainstream contemporary Gujarati literature. Soloman Macwan is a well known dramatist and his works include 'Antim Aansu (1943), *Vehmine Vaanke* (1943), *Mewadi Talwar* and *Saahi Satta* (1954).<sup>17</sup> Carlos Valles (b. 1925) known popularly as 'Father Valles' has contributed significantly to Gujarati literature. As recognition of his contribution to Gujarati literature, Valles received 'kumarchandrak' award in 1966 and Ranjitram Suvarnachandrak award in 1978.<sup>18</sup> Another Well known Christian contribution to Gujarati literature is made by Joseph Macwan (b. 1936) who has written a number of novels. His novel *Angaliath* (1986) describes the caste tensions between the Vankar and Patel communities. Joseph Macwan received Sahitya Academy Award in 1989. Yoseph Macwan (b.1940) is a well known modern Catholic poet from Ahmedabad. His poems include 'Swagath' (1968), 'Surajno haath' (1983), 'Tofan' (1979) and 'ding dong ding dong' (1982).<sup>19</sup> After delineating these contexts briefly, in the next section we shall focus on 'Christ in Gujarati poetry.'

### 3. Christ in Gujarati Poetry

Two categories of poets have written about Christ in Gujarati poetry, namely, Christian poets and non-Christian poets. Both these groups have taken various aspects of Jesus' life and death in their poetic expression. I have presented here eight Gujarati poets who have written poems about Christ.

One of the earliest poetic expressions about Christ was by the famous Gujarati poet Kavi Kant (1867-1923). It has been pointed out

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- 16 See, R. R. Parmar, "Catholic Sahityano Uday," in *Ahmedabad Mission Golden Jubilee Souvenir*, ed. Varghese Paul (Ahmedabad: Catholic Information Centre, 1984) pp. 18-23.
  - 17 Chandrakanth Topiwala, (ed), *Gujarati Sahityakosh, Khand-II, Arvacheen Kal* (Ahmedabad: Gujarati Sahitya Parishad, 1990) p. 493.
  - 18 Chandrakanth Topiwala, (ed), *Gujarati Sahityakosh, Khand-II, Arvacheen Kal*, p. 539.
  - 19 Chandrakanth Topiwala, (ed), *Gujarati Sahityakosh, Khand-II, Arvacheen Kal*, p. 493.

that with Kant, Gujarati literature entered its 'spring' season. Kant was able to combine a sense of tragedy with a deep sense of subjective experience in his poetry. Several poems of Kant reflect his Christian faith, especially his own turmoil and confusion. One of his well known poems 'Endless Love' is about the story of the Prodigal son (Lk 15). Kant writes:

No love but yours is so deep, Lord – Father and God!

No love but yours is so deep, Lord!

Lost you seemed; how could I sleep Lord? Father and God!

No love but yours is so deep, Lord!<sup>20</sup>

Against the background of the ambiguities surrounding his own Christian identity, it is not entirely surprising that Kant abstains from the explicit use of the name of Christ. Instead, he uses soteriological titles such as 'Saviour' (*tarak*) and 'Lord' (*prabhu*).

Kalapi (Sursinhji Takhsinhji Gohil, 1874-1900) was the native prince of small state called Lati in Saurashtra. Kalapi was educated at the elite Rajkumar College at Rajkot. He was influenced by English Romantic poets such as Wordsworth, Shelly, Keats and Byron.<sup>21</sup> Kalapi was the contemporary of Kavi Kant and both corresponded with each other on very personal matters. The young prince seems to have read the Bible under the influence of Kavi Kant. Kalapi had been initiated into the Theosophical Society and, to some extent, he was influenced by it. Here, we shall focus on his 12 line poem entitled 'Swarga-geet' [Heavenly-poem] which was composed in 1899. The first two stanzas speak about those who are 'lost' like the Prodigal son.<sup>22</sup> In the First stanza of this poem, Kalapi writes:

20 C.f., Robin Boyd, *Church History of Gujarat* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1981) p. 132. See also Manishankar Rathnaji Bhatt, *Purvalap* (Mumbai and Ahmedabad: R. R. Shetni Company, 1970) pp. 167 & 297.

21 *Dhanya Gujarati Kendra Prakashan – 2: Gujarati* (Ahmedabad: Gujarat Vishvakosh Trust, 2007) p. 359.

22 Ananthrai Rawal, ed., *Kalapino Kavyakalap* (Ahmedabad: Gurjar Granthratna karyalay, [1954] 1969) p. 283. The same information can be found also in Ananthrai Rawal, *Kalapino Kekarav* (Rajkot; Praveen Pusthak Bhandar, [Hindu year, 2038]).

Call the lost:  
 Tell Lord's message:  
 Bring water to wash the feet  
 For the lost ones.

Through this poem Kalapi draws our attention towards God's merciful love for those who are lost. Like several Hindu intellectuals of the nineteenth century, Kalapi was also fascinated by the life and message of Jesus.

Sundaram (Tribhuvandas Purushottamdas Luhar, 1908-1991), along with Umashankar Joshi, has been acclaimed as one of the most gifted of modern Gujarati poetry.<sup>23</sup> Influenced by Sri Aurobindo, Sundaram turned towards the idea of 'poornayoga' for god-realization.<sup>24</sup> Many of Sundaram's poems reflect not only a deep spiritual experience, but also a profound humanism. His humanistic vision is reflected in his well known saying: 'If I could become a human being, it would be a worthy achievement' (hun manavi manav thaun tho ghanu'). Sundaram wrote a poem on Jesus, which forms part of the poems dedicated to Buddha, Jesus and Gandhi. This poem on Jesus which is entitled 'Esu' (Gujarati for Jesus) has 14 lines. In the first stanza Sundaram describes the selfishness and unjust situation of the world:

The world was steeped in selfishness,  
 Without any fear of god and intoxicated in worldliness,  
 The powerful oppressed the poor and the weak,  
 Turning the world into a virtual hell.

It is into such situation that Jesus came with the message of love, humility, peace and compassion.<sup>25</sup> In the first stanza which describes the situation of the world before the incarnation of Jesus Christ reminds us the *Bhagavat Gita* 4: 7 in which Krishna speaks about the purpose

23 See, Chandrakanth Topiwala, (ed), "Luhar Tribhuvandas Purushottamdas," in *Gujarati Sahityakosh, Khand-II, Arvacheen Kal* (Ahmedabad: Gujarati Sahitya Parishad, 1990) pp. 528-29.

24 C.f. *Dhanya Gujarati Kendra Prakashan - 2: Gujarati* (Ahmedabad: Gujarati Vishvakosh Trust, 2007) pp. 373-74. The Gujarati journal *Uddesh* (March 2008) brought out a special issue for his birth centenary.

25 Sundaram, "Esu," in *Cross and Kavi*, compiler, Yoseph Macwan, pp. 4-5.



of his *avatara*: “For whenever the law of righteousness withers away and lawlessness arises, then do I generate Myself [on earth].”<sup>26</sup>

Priyakant Maniyar (1927-1976) is another prominent Gujarati poet who wrote poetry on Jesus. Maniyar has strengthened modern Gujarati poetry with rhythm, romanticism, rich imageries and symbolism.<sup>27</sup> Maniyar has used the symbolism of the ‘cross’ to express his social ideas. For example, in the poem entitled ‘Does anyone want to ask anything?’ [‘Koine kain poochvu che?], Maniyar’s exclamation “that which happens on the cross has happened,” [‘cross par je thai – che te thai gayun’] signifies the benumbed or indifferent attitude of the society.<sup>28</sup> In his short poem ‘Khila’ (Nails), Priyakant Maniyar invokes Jesus’ crucifixion and suffering without explicitly mentioning those things. In this nine-line poem, the poetic imagination focuses on the black-smith who made the nails which were used to crucify Jesus.<sup>29</sup> In another poem of 10 lines entitled ‘Darsan,’ Maniyar sees the image of crucified Christ in the face of thousands of human beings.<sup>30</sup> The main thrust of this poem may be rendered in English as follows:

I know no other Christ except in the crucified form.

The image of Him, crucified

Never leaves my mind

In His [Jesus’] outstretched hands on the Cross

I see the faces of thousands of human beings.

26 “*yadâ yadâ hi dharmasya glânir bhavati, Bhârata, abhyutthânânam adharmasya tadâ’tmânânam srjâmy aham.*” R. C. Zaehner, *The Bhagavat-Gita* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975) p. 184. It was Sunil Macwan S. J. who drew my attention to the homology between *Bhagavat-Gita* (4:7) and Sundaram’s poem.

27 C.f. *Dhanya Gujarati Kendra Prakashan – 2: Gujarati* (Ahmedabad: Gujarat Vishvakosh Trust, 2007) p. 387; Ramesh M. Trivedi, *Arvacheen Gujarati Sahityano Itihas* (Ahmedabad: Adarsh Prakashan, 2006) pp. 244-246.

28 *Dhanya Gujarati Kendra Prakashan – 2: Gujarati* (Ahmedabad: Gujarat Vishvakosh Trust, 2007) p. 387.

29 See, Priyakant Maniyar, “Khila,” in *Cross ane Kavi*, compiler, Yoseph Macwan, pp. 31-32.

30 Priyakant Maniyar, “Darsan,” in *Cross ane Kavi*, compiler, Yoseph Macwan, pp. 33-34.

Priyakant Maniyar's poem reminds me of the Spanish Jesuit Luis Espinal (1932-1980) who was murdered in Bolivia, who was able to recognize God in the face of men and women, in every smile, in every problem, in the cross, in the crucifixions of slums and jails and in tenderness: "The streets are overcrowded with Christ," wrote Espinal.

Niranjan Bhagat (b. 1926) is one of the leading poets of contemporary Gujarat.<sup>31</sup> He received several awards for his poetic and literary pursuits: 'Kumar'-Chandrak (1949), Narmad Gold Medal (1953-57), Sri Ranjitram Gold Medal (1969), Gujarat Sahitya Academy Award (1993). Bhagat has written a moving poem on Christ entitled "Pathar thar thar druje" (Stones shudder in fear).<sup>32</sup> Bhagat wrote this twenty lines poem based on John 8: 1-11, 'The Woman Caught in Adultery.' The opening lines of the poem, which focuses on the 'stones,' (carried by the crowd) reflects Niranjan Bhagat's poetic creativity:

Stones shudder in fear!  
Hands, evil and lifeless,  
Who will alleviate pain of the stone?  
Stones shudder in fear!

The stones which are carried for the killing of the woman, shudder. For the poet, the paradox is: Which is inert or lifeless (Gujarati, *jâd*)? Is it the stone or the people who want to kill the woman? In this poem Bhagat describes human opaqueness towards their own 'dark-spots' while they sit at the judgment throne to condemn others.

In his poem 'On Seeing the Picture of Jesus' Yoseph Macwan (b.1940) describes the gap between the values of Jesus and the human limitations of putting into practice those values. This poem is almost like a soliloquy:

Crown of thorns on your head, and  
Blood-drops between your lips...

31 See, Chandrakanth Topiwala, (ed), "Bhagat Niranjan Narharilal," in *Gujarati Sahityakosh, Khand-II, Arvacheen Kal* (Ahmedabad: Gujarati Sahitya Parishad, 1990) pp. 404-405.

32 Niranjan Bhagat, "Pathar thar thar druje," in *Cross ane Kavi*, compiler, Yoseph Macwan p. 26.

I speak about you often  
 And keep your picture in my drawing-room –  
 I try to be human a little bit, but –  
 What about the gap of 2000 years  
 Between you and me?

Then I hear a gentle sound from within:  
 Were you not there before 2000 years?  
 And I said: keep quite...<sup>33</sup>

There is a 'modern' twist to the poem reflected in the last line, which is expressed rather picturesquely in Gujarati, namely, *chupmar* (keep quite or shut up). According to Yoseph Macwan, this poem reflects the 'flexibility of thought and the experiential moment.'

Philip Clark is a contemporary Catholic poet who has written several poems. In his poem entitled 'Echo' (*Padga*), Philip Clark hears the sound of the Church bell as the echo of the nailing of Jesus. Philip's poem may be rendered into English as follows:

The sound of the church bell that breaks through darkness  
 Far ... far... tun ...tun ... tun  
 The sound of the hammering of the nail from nearby house  
 Tuk... tuk... tuk...  
 That echoes the hammering of the nails on Jesus' skull  
 Tuk... tuk... tuk...<sup>34</sup>

Let me end this article by citing one poem written by Vipin Parekh entitled 'To Jesus and Gandhi' (*Esu thadha Gandhine*).<sup>35</sup> In this poem Parekh describes human nature and its relation to truth: In their weakness, human beings do not want to confront truth. Truth, embodied in Jesus and Gandhi, becomes too uncomfortable for human beings. Parekh's poem may be translated as follows:

33 Yoseph Macwan, "Esuni Chabi jotha," in *Cross ane Kavi*, compiler, Yoseph Macwan, p. 37.

34 Philip Clark, "Padga," in *Cross ane Kavi*, compiler, Yoseph Macwan, p. 51.

35 Vipin Parekh, "Esu ane Gandhine," in *Cross ane Kavi*, compiler, Yoseph Macwan, pp. 44-45.

Being a weak creature,  
 For human, sleep is very dear.  
 If you wake him up suddenly,  
 Will he not crucify you in his anger? Or  
 Will he not kill you if he has a gun?  
 Omniscient as you are, did you not know  
 That you should not wake people from their slumber?

The Catholic Gujarati magazine *Doot* has been publishing poems written by aspiring young poets and many of these poems focus on Jesus. Since this magazine is limited to Catholic readers, the circulation of these poems does not go beyond the confines of Catholic community. Apart from these poems, there is a good collection of Gujarati hymns. Our survey need to mention the large number of tribal hymns: Gamits, Vasavas, Dangis and Bhils have developed significant number of hymns in their own languages. Life, teachings, parables, sufferings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are incorporated into these tribal hymns.

### Conclusion

Gujarati poets who have written poems on Christ remain very limited. Christian presence is somewhat marginal because of the historical reasons indicated already. Literary production presupposes certain cultural and social conditions. Literary production becomes secondary for people who have to think in the first place about their survival. Artistic and aesthetic expressions, which are intrinsic part of the cultural web of meaning, do not stand in isolation. Literature is part and parcel of social relations and it reflects the relations of production. Gujarati literature has been dominated by the upper strata of the society. Will the mainstream Gujarati society recognize Christians for their literary talents and creativity? Going by the signs of the times of contemporary Gujarat, it would appear that such recognition might take some time.

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# Jesus Christ in Tamil Epic Literature

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In the history of Tamil Christian literature we find a spurt of poetic activity in the first five years of the 21st century. One of the important epics written between 2000-2005 was *Yesu Maakavyam* or 'The Greatest Epic on Jesus' by poetess Nirmala Suresh. The poetess brings out various dimensions of the Personality of Jesus in this long epic with 144 chapters. The author of this article makes an attempt to introduce to the reader various titles of Jesus that appear in this epic. While being faithful to the Gospel narrations about the life and mission of Jesus Nirmala Suresh gives fresh and creative interpretations to the life and teachings of Jesus through certain imageries drawn from the socio-cultural and religious context of her life.

Tamil Literature has got a rich tradition of Devotional Literature. Christian Literature has developed a unique Genre. Constantine Joseph Beschi, also known as 'Veeramamunivar' wrote the first Christian epic *Thembavani*, on the life of St. Joseph in which the story of life of Jesus finds great importance.

Much of Christian epic Literature emerged, following the literary works of Beschi in the fag end of twentieth century as well as beginning of the 21st century. "Epic on Jesus" - *Yesu Kavyam* was written by poet Kannanadasan. This creative work was done in the traditional literary form. *Arul Avatharam* - 'The Incarnation of Grace', another monumental epic on the life of Jesus in three volumes was written by Prof. V. Maria Antony. He worked for 15 years (1968-1983) to complete this epic. It was published recently by another great Tamil Christian scholar Prof. P. Valan Arasu.

The third noteworthy Christian Epic on Jesus written in modern poetic form by Nirmala Suresh in 2001 is “The Greatest Epic on Jesus” - *Yesu Maakavyam* .. The Fourth one “The New Covenant” - *Puthia Sasanam* was written by Vincent Chinnadurai in 2002. The fifth epic, “The Story of Jesus” - *Yesuvin Kathai* written in modern poetry by Xavier was published in 2005. In the history of Tamil Christian literature we find a spurt of poetic activity in the first five years of the 21st century.

In her epic on Jesus, - *Yesu Maakavyam*, Nirmala Suresh presents Jesus Christ as the embodiment of poetry itself. She mentions in her introduction of the epic, that Jesus is the magnification of poetry. A decade ago she wrote a poem on ‘Christ the Socialist’. This was broadcasted by Radio Veritas and was well received by the listeners. The positive response she received from the listeners encouraged her to embark on this new venture of writing an epic on Jesus. Her theological studies, especially her study of Liberation theology and Process theology, influenced her writing of this epic on Jesus. Having written the greatest epic on Jesus, Nirmala Suresh brought out another collection of poems titled, “The Son of the Carpenter and the anointing casket” - *Thachan Maganum thaila chimizhum*. In this work of art, Ms. Nirmala employs a unique narrative technique to articulate how both the living and the non living creatures praise and glorify Jesus Christ.

In this article an attempt is made to give a short description about the various titles of Jesus which appear in the epic *Yesu Maakavyam*. We find the following Christological titles in ‘Greatest Epic on Jesus’.

1. Jesus, the Embodiment of Literature
2. Jesus, the Ordinary yet Extraordinary
3. Jesus , the Nazarene
4. Jesus, the son of a Carpenter
5. Jesus, the Healer and the Medicine
6. Jesus, the Son of God
7. Jesus, the Redeemer
8. Jesus, the Symbol of Brotherhood

9. Jesus, the Teacher of Wisdom
10. Jesus, the Prophet of the Kingdom to come
11. Jesus, the Suffering, the Tortured Man
12. Jesus, the Resurrected Saviour

### 1. Jesus the Embodiment of Literature

According to poet Nirmala, the whole Bible is beautiful poetry. To have an insight into the life of Christ, the poet relies on the four gospels. She has taken the narrations of the evangelists as the primary source to explain the life of Jesus from his birth to his resurrection. She justifies her statement that Jesus himself is literature because he is the Word or the Meaning, the beginning and the end of literature.

He is common poetry  
Goes beyond religious forms!  
He can't be subjected to  
any title contents for ever!!

Jesus is an incomparable person in whose discourse one can find innumerable metaphors and imagerie. The soil of the land of his birth made him a symbol of revolution. The miraculous flash of light emanating from his person blinded his enemies that they branded him as a person who is "obscure!"

Jesus is the Nature. Those who have seen him only an idealist nailed him on the cross. Those who have seen him as the reality itself followed him. Looking at the life-span of Jesus one may think that he was a short-story. But in history he is a continuous epic.

Jesus is a haiku<sup>1</sup> poem. The first line of the verse consists of his fame; the second line contains his death; the third line contains his act of redemption. What a wonderful poem he is! His listeners get a new consciousness due to his teachings, says the poet. Jesus is the literature of living philosophy and the philosophy of living literature.

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1 Haiku is a kind of *Japanese poetry*. Previously called *hokku*, it was given its current name in the late 19th century by Japanese writer Masaoka Shiki,. In English, a haiku poem is usually written in three lines to equate to the three parts of a haiku in Japanese that traditionally consist of five, seven, and then five.

He is a literary text containing good, truth and beauty in a very deep sense.

Jesus is the only imperishable literature which can survive, in spite of different types of criticisms in the world, the literature called Jesus continues!

## 2. Jesus, the Ordinary yet Extraordinary

Poet makes an attempt to narrate who Jesus was :

He was born a human person

But not an ordinary person!

He was born a Jew

But Jewish people did not follow him!

Before his birth all indicated

Only epigrammatic meanings

But the scripture itself became

a meaningful commentary to explain

Who he is!

Those who surrounded him were

always the marginalized

Those who lived keeping him

away were elite of the society!

Jesus removed the iron curtain between Heaven and Earth! He turned the world upside down as it was leaning towards the side of the rich. He uncovered the mask of the "Master" and expressed the face of the "Father". King Solomon made silver so cheap as stone: but Jesus Christ revealed a God so simple, that God became so approachable for the ordinary people of his time and for all people of all times.

## 3. Jesus, the Nazarene

On top of the Cross, the Roman Governor had written Jesus, Nazarene, and King of the Jews. Jesus is like a sapling planted by God the Father in a farm at Nazareth. It produced an ideal crop. The word 'Nazarene' denotes a sort of fasting - sacrifice. During his



youth Jesus was called Nazarene. He empowered himself through union with his Father and grew in total freedom and spontaneity.

Even during his childhood, Jesus learnt carpentry from his adopted father Joseph. Soon he transformed himself to be a worker with a deep understanding of reality and a wider of vision of the world. His deep knowledge of persons, things and the structures of the society made him critical about systems that dehumanize people, especially, the Jewish laws and customs.

#### 4. Jesus the son of a Carpenter

For the people of his time Jesus was only a carpenter and a carpenter's son. They raised their eyebrows when they heard him speak those words of wisdom. But in the epic of Nirmala Suresh Jesus, the carpenter, appears not as an ordinary carpenter, but the one who could shape the minds of humans to become better humans by their openness to God and to other humans. He challenged those in power and those who live in comfort by refusing to support their ways of oppression. He took the side of the poor by reaching out to them with love and compassion. This character of Jesus is powerfully expressed in the following lines:

He made windows  
 So that air of all directions  
 could keep it to remain opened!  
 As it is for the psyche  
 the shutter for the doors  
 he made  
 were structured  
 from within!  
 Those doors couldn't be  
 locked from outside!!  
 He didn't prepare armchairs  
 for those in power!  
 He made wooden seats  
 for the poorest of the poor...

The time wheels were  
 repaired by him and  
 fit in the historical cart...  
 Even if multi-crosses were given  
 He never made a cross  
 in which anyone can be nailed!!

### 5. Jesus, the Healer and the Medicine

The New Testament narrates many instances of Jesus healing people of their sicknesses. But the question can be raised: Was Jesus only a healer or a physician? For the poet Jesus was not only a physician *par excellence* but also the medicine. Those who smelled this herbal medicine or touched it got healed. He healed people not only of their physical sicknesses but also their psychological and spiritual sicknesses. He brought them wholeness and serenity. He not only opened their physical eyes but also their inner eyes to see the 'grandeur of God' in the world. The poet contrasts those believers who were healed of their exterior and interior blindness with those unbelievers who had bad eyes or lost their eyesight. A real vision of the reality is possible only for those who accept Jesus, the healer. An inner refusal to accept Jesus, the healer and medicine leaves the unbelievers to live with bad eyesight or in total blindness.

When he walked  
 There emerged a herbal breeze  
 Those who smelled, got cured  
 Ailment cured of those  
 who could touch him.  
 There was magnet!  
 There was serenity!!  
 in his finger tips,  
 in his voice,  
 in his tone!  
 The universal force

centered in Hair  
 Nature was always  
 awaiting to serve him.  
 Not only he opened  
 Physical eyes  
 He opened wisdom eyes too!  
 Those who had very bad eyes  
 couldn't tolerate  
 Those who lost their  
 Eyesight were faithless lows  
 The faithful received everything asked  
 Enjoyed his green pastures!!

## **6. Jesus, the Son of God**

God spoke to humanity through His son Jesus. Sermon on the Mount is considered to be the essence of his teaching. Though Jesus sat on top of hill to preach to people, he spoke about the valleys. He taught them to think "Big" and "high". He didn't turn the hills but turned their minds. The cries of the marginalized were heard by him and he responded with love and compassion!

Miracles were performed by Jesus so that people of his time could read the signs of the coming Kingdom. He performed miracles so that they could identify that kingdom has come and he is the Son of God: The dead were given life; lepers were cured. Even on Sabbath day, he didn't stop curing the sick. He affirmed that the rule of law is for the people and the people are not for the laws or rules! The darkroom of dehumanizing laws was removed by the flashing light of the words of Jesus. He claimed that he was the way, the truth, the light, the Good Shepherd, Son of God, redeemer, Prophet, Guru and the embodiment of the love of God. Finally, he allowed himself to be tortured and crucified. Jesus proved his words by sacrificing his life on the cross, shedding the last drop of his blood on this earth.

The disciples of Jesus encountered him as the Son of God who could multiply five loaves of bread to feed more than five thousand people. They were frightened when they saw him walking on the

water. They surrendered at his feet when they saw that the sea obeyed his commands to keep calm.

The poet brings in a new interpretation to the episode of Jesus' walking on the sea and Peter's attempt to walk on the sea in order to reach Jesus

Jesus warned that  
 Shaking faith is dangerous!  
 The apostles said  
 He who walks on the sea  
 is the son of God!  
 The poet says:  
 All who can walk on the sea  
 Can't become Jesus Christ!

## 7. Jesus, the Redeemer

In the Jewish scripture, 'Torah', it is written, Messiah, the anointed would come to redeem Israel. The poet, Nirmala, gives an insight into the mystery of the Messiah through various paradoxes of his personality. The redeemer, the Messiah, appears differently at the dawn, during the day and at night. No one can clearly see the real face of the Messiah. The divine and human dimensions are integrated in him so mysteriously that when the believers see only his divine dimension he reminds them of his humanity and when the unbelievers see only human dimension he affirms his true identity.

In their dream at the dawn  
 Jesus appeared as the *peoples' Leader Messiah!*  
 In their day dream  
 Jesus appeared as *their King Messiah!!*  
 In their dream during night  
 Jesus was visible to be *their Prophet Messiah!!!*  
 No one could see clearly  
 the face of Messiah in any of the dreams!  
 If they look at him as God  
 he reminded them to observe his human face



if they observe and pointed their fingers

stating that he is an ordinary person

He asserted himself

"I am the Messiah!"

People failed to identify who Jesus was. He was like a waterfall. Those who intended to wet their head, came closer to the waterfall. But those who tried to dip only their fingers, stood away.

## 8. Jesus and Brotherhood

Jesus elaborated the meaning of brotherhood, from blood relationship to neighbourhood relationship. Going beyond the traditional broader understanding that one's brothers or sisters as those who belong to the same country or nation Jesus proclaims a new criterion to recognize any one as one's brother or mother:

Whoever does the work of God

will be my brothers!

Whoever does the work of God

will be my mother!!

Jesus gave clear and unambiguous directions to solve the disputes between brothers. When one feels that his brother has something against him and wants to take him to court the first thing to do is to enter into a dialogue with him to make him understand his mistake and try to make peace with him. If this is not possible dialogue with him in the presence of witnesses. If this too does not help bring a compromise or harmony between them then let the court decide who is right.

The poet says:

"The person who refuses to compromise

cannot be planted

in the field of harmony!"

## 9. Jesus – the Teacher of Wisdom

The wisdom-sayings of Jesus can be compared to the teaching of a Zen-Master. A Zen-Master helps his disciple to transcend the boundaries of worldly ideas step by step and experience true wisdom.

The poet finds certain teachings of Jesus similar to the wise-saying of a great Zen Master. Jesus advocates Faith-Action:

A tree will transplant itself  
 into the sea,  
 if one orders to do so with  
 Fullest faith  
 The thirst of the soul  
 will get quenched  
 only with the life giving water  
 offered by Jesus  
 If one commits crimes  
 He becomes a slave to himself  
 If salt loses its essence  
 Nothing can make its saltiness  
 The rich finished building his warehouse  
 But his life came to an end  
 One who tries to gallop in two houses  
 at a time will surely fall down into a pit!  
 If three persons gather together  
 in my name  
 the fourth person will be there  
 "That is myself"

The words of Jesus, the Teacher of Wisdom are pictured by the poet in visual form through simple proper words in a proper beautiful order.

### **10. Jesus – The Prophet of the Kingdom to Come**

The poet points out the values of the kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed during his life-time on earth. Jesus spoke with prophetic vision, how the last days of the kingdom would break in to the present unexpectedly. Those who are aware of it and awaiting its coming would see it like a flashing of light.

Like a steamboat Movement  
 It will start all of a sudden!

*In that night* I tell you  
 there will be two people  
 sleeping on the same bed  
 One will be taken away  
 the other will be left behind.  
 Two women will be grinding  
 Corn together; one will be taken away  
 the other will be left behind

The criterion set forth by God to enter heaven will be the humanizing activity of each person. The Father of Jesus will invite them to possess the kingdom prepared for them ever since the creation of the world. "I was hungry; you fed me; thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you received me into your homes, naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison, and you visited me." 'These words of Jesus find simple, creative and colourful expression in the epic Yesu Maakavyam..

### **11. Jesus - the Suffering – the Cruelly Tortured**

When Jesus was arrested, the two enemies Herod the Great and the Roman Governor Pilate became friends. They considered Jesus as a political rebel; a threat to their power. They managed to secure the support of the Jewish masses. They considered him a self-styled leader of the oppressed and marginalized. They heard about him and suspected that he would topple them from their positions of power and become the king of Israel. In order to please Herod, although Pilate knew that Jesus was innocent, he gave orders to torture him.. Though the Bible doesn't say how many times he was whipped the poet gives a detailed narration about how Jesus was cruelly whipped and was tortured:

Jesus was  
 whipped Forty times;  
 Jesus went on a fast  
 for Forty days before;

The whip contained  
 animal bone strings attached  
 Jealousy of the Jewish  
 Religious Leaders  
 Greediness of political power  
 Another whip contained  
 thorns attachment  
 the symbol of selfishness  
 to accumulate unlimited wealth.  
 Jesus was not attacked violently  
 and cruelly by Atheism  
 But then, by theism  
 Like a Golden dress  
 tarnished into pieces  
 Like a rose flower crushed  
 Like chords of veena  
 cut off  
 Like an earth cracked  
 and split  
 The body of Jesus was  
 tarnished into proof of blood  
 quivering, fluttering and broken  
 There was no place to be  
 tortured further!

## 12. Jesus, the Resurrected

It is in the transforming encounter of Mary Magdalene with the Risen Lord, the revelation of Jesus as the Resurrected one takes place. The fear of the Jewish leaders that Jesus would rise again prompted them to secure some Roman soldiers to guard the tomb of Jesus. Mary too had fear and anxiety about her existential situation of being left alone in the world without the presence of her beloved



Lord and Master. So when she heard the voice of Jesus revealing to her who he was, her initial shock gives way to surrender. 'She knelt down at his feet like the fall of rose petals'. When a rose sheds its petals it does not exist any more as a rose but as an offering at the feet of the Lord. Its new identity is given by the Lord. 'She flew away like a dove' with the feeling of being born again. Using simple but powerful imageries the poetess depicts the scene of the encounter between Jesus and Mary Magdalene in the following lines:

"I am Jesus"  
 the voice was heard  
 She had a shock of her life  
 Seeing him closer  
 She knelt down at his feet  
 like the fall of rose petals  
 'Go quickly and tell the disciples!'  
 She flew away like a dove  
 She felt as if she was born again"

### Conclusion

Through various Christological titles Nirmala Suresh tries to describe the multi-dimensional personality of Jesus in her epic *Yesu Maakavyam*. She narrates the story of Jesus in 144 chapters. It is to be noted that the apocryphal gospel, *The Gospel of Thomas* has 144 logions. The Holy Quran which seemed to have followed the apocryphal writings also has 144 suras. Probably such traditional narrations might have influenced the poetess in writing the epic in 144 chapters. The poetess took ten years to complete this great work. She made a pilgrimage to Israel, meditated on the events narrated in the Gospels. She claims that the historical Jesus was a revolutionary and it was her intention to articulate this dimension of Jesus in her epic on Jesus. Nirmala Suresh's epic on Jesus Christ is not only a great contribution to the development of Tamil Christian literature but also a deeply inspiring and challenging introduction to the life of Jesus.

# **Jesus, the Story-Teller**

**Jacob Parappally**

The New Testament presents Jesus as a unique story-teller. His poetic imagination finds expression in his stories known as parables which are replete with symbols, metaphors and imageries. The source of his stories was his intimate, personal and unique relationship with his Abba, God the Father Jesus' stories have a great power to awaken in the minds of the hearers either an openness to look into their lives letting themselves be transformed or a stubborn refusal to his invitation to conversion. The listeners cannot remain indifferent or neutral. They have to make a decision either for him or against him, either for the Kingdom of God or against it, either accept the God of Jesus for whom humans are more important or for the God of religion for whom the temple, the law and the status quo are important.

Everyone has a story: a story of his or her own life. Everyone lives that story till the end. But there was one in the history whose story never ended. It was Jesus of Nazareth. Even when others scripted an end to his story he would only accept a part of it. The plot of the story was changed by a Power beyond human comprehension in such a way that the story would not end. Like his own life-story, the stories Jesus told remain open-ended. That is something unique about Jesus' stories. For the last 2000 years Jesus is recognized, admired and valued as a great story-teller. People of his time marvelled at the wisdom, challenges, depth and simplicity of his stories. They are told and re-told by generations after generations in different languages and cultures and they affect the lives of the people for better. What was unique about Jesus, the story teller and what was

unique about the stories he told? In this paper an attempt is made to answer these questions.

### 1. Jesus, a Unique Story-teller

In his time Jesus was known as a Rabbi or teacher. He was also called a prophet and Messiah. But none of these titles suited him. He would, perhaps, reluctantly accept them not because of his inner insecurity but because he knew for certain that his consciousness of his mission cannot be expressed through any of these titles. He could be considered a Rabbi but he was not like other Rabbis before him or after him. Like a Rabbi he taught but he was a different type of Rabbi. The Rabbis of Jewish tradition were sought after by the prospective disciples. Jesus went out and called the disciples to him. Traditional Rabbis held official teaching at specified places but Jesus did not choose a particular place to teach. He taught not only in synagogues but also in Simon's house. He would teach from the top of the mountain and also from the plain. He would teach while walking through cornfields or walking through the city streets. He would teach the people on the seashore by sitting in the boat of Simon Peter or on the way to Jerusalem.

Jesus' hearers included all types of people from all strata of his society. There were farmers and fishermen, scholarly teachers of the Law and ignorant law-breakers, so called wise and learned Pharisees and Sadducees as well as so called sinners, namely, the poor, the sick, the tax collectors and prostitutes. He had something to tell them all, to each one according to his or her need. So they all listened to his story. His story was different. Different from all the stories they had ever heard before. He told stories not to entertain them but confront them. He told stories not to exhibit his talent as a story-teller but to bring out the treasures lying hidden in the listener. His stories led the listener to the mystery of God, to the mystery of humans and to the mystery of the world. They were confronted by the reality of being involved in the mystery. They were slowly led to see with their inner eyes depth of the mystery of life in history, indeed in Jesus' story. God who began the story, Jesus the story-teller and the people, the listeners of the story- all belonged to the plot of the story. The story was narrated in the field of the Kingdom, on the

stage of the World so that the lilies of the field, the mustard seeds and vineyards, the fields and barns, the birds of the air and the foxes in their holes, the serpents and the scorpions, the lambs and the goats could find a place in his story.

The characters of Jesus' stories were not mythical characters with superhuman strength or knowledge. They were taken from the society of his time. They were all characters whom the listeners could recognize and identify as their next door neighbours or people whom they encountered everyday in their villages or towns. A publican or a Pharisee, the owner of a vineyard or the owner of a pair of oxen, the guests at a wedding party, a farmer who comes from the field tired or a farmer who sows the seeds, servants who are faithful or unfaithful, industrious or slothful, compassionate or oppressive, an unjust judge or a rich man who provides even for dogs but does not care for a poor man at his doorstep, a woman who searches for her lost coin or a woman who leavens the dough, a persevering widow or a group of careless virgins, a father who doesn't want to disturb his sleeping children or a father who waits for the awakening and the returning of his lost son are all characters with flesh and blood. Thus the hearers would get immediately connected to the context of the story. They find themselves as part of his story. Thus, "Jesus' teaching method involves the hearers or readers in the context of the parables. It removes them from their comfort zones and places them in the story to become active participants. The hearers of the parable of the lost son are the Pharisees and teachers of the law who are portrayed by the older son. They are invited to come and participate in the joy of the forgiven son who personifies the tax collectors and moral outcasts. But if they refuse to come, they in effect are the ones who are lost and dead."<sup>1</sup>

Jesus' story has such power to awaken in the minds of the hearers either an openness to look into their lives and let them be transformed or a stubborn refusal to his invitation to conversion. The listeners cannot remain indifferent or neutral. They have to make a decision either for him or against him, either for the Kingdom of God or against it, either accept the God of Jesus for whom humans are important or for the God of religion for whom the temple, the law and the status



quo are important. The listener is terribly challenged. He or she cannot go home from the scene without making a decision.

## II. The Source of Jesus Stories

Though settings and the characters of Jesus' stories did not have anything extraordinary or spectacular about them, some people were touched and transformed by his stories. The transformation of the listeners took place because of the story-teller and the way he narrated the story. The people immediately recognized that there is something extraordinary about the story-teller as well as the narration of the story. They were convinced of the fact that in his teaching he was not like the Scribes and the Pharisees they were familiar with: He spoke with authority (Mk 1:22) He was not parroting the story of someone else. They came from within. His stories had their immediate source in his Abba-experience.

Jesus' Abba-experience was an intimate, personal and unique experience of God. It welled up from deep within himself. The freedom, the simplicity and the spontaneity with which he addressed God as *Abba*, the babbling sound of children addressing their own fathers with such emotional familiarity, was uniquely his own. The way he communicated that experience through his words, deeds and life-style reveal that he was someone who was bubbling with enthusiasm and struggling with the poverty of the language to communicate that experience so that his hearers could experience this God in way hitherto unknown to them.

Language falls short when one needs to articulate and communicate one's experience whether religious or otherwise. It is in such situations myths, stories and symbols are evolved to express that experience, in order to evoke in the listeners a certain insight to the mystery of that experience. Jesus' consciousness of his mission was to proclaim his Abba-experience and to proclaim the way his Abba wanted humans to become truly humans and order their lives in the society. This had to be communicated. Thus he had an all-embracing and all encompassing story to tell. The story of his Abba-experience. If we take the NT account seriously, Jesus grew in this Abba-experience. At one moment in his life, at his baptism in river

Jordan, he had an intense experience of his Abba. He experienced himself as the beloved of the Father and felt empowered by the Spirit to communicate this experience. He broke the boundaries of his own self-identification, the boundaries of his family and the boundaries of his society to tell this story to set all humans free.<sup>2</sup>

He would have been tempted to shout from the pinnacle of Jerusalem temple or from the top of the Mount Olives, "Listen, those who have ears and their minds open! The God, about whom the teachers of our religion are telling you, is not the real God who revealed himself to our fathers. Their God is the God of the religion. For this God, you are not important, but Sabbath is. For this God of religion, laws, regulations, ritual purity are important and not moral purity... In this God's name, you, people, can be divided and discriminated as pure and impure, holy and sinners, righteous and unrighteous, the divinely blessed rich and the divinely cursed poor, strong and reliable males and weak and unreliable females, divinely chosen Jews and divinely abandoned Samaritans and gentiles, those at the centre like the Scribes and the Pharisees and those at the periphery like the tax-collectors, prostitutes, the deaf, the blind, the leper, the paralyzed and the possessed. For Heaven's sake this is not the true God, I have encountered and encountering every moment of my life. He is my *Abba*. He is a forgiving and loving God, an infinitely loving and compassionate Father who suffers with you when you suffer, rejoices with you when you rejoice. He welcomes you unconditionally when you return to him. He wants you to become really human and fully free, live as dignified sons and daughters, without being high or low, without being superior or inferior, high caste or low caste. His reign has come. It is here, within you and amidst you. I urge you to recognize it, accept it and celebrate it. In this kingdom, you, all, are brothers and sisters. The first one to the last one, the law-abiding and those who had gone astray and returned, the Jew and the Gentile". Jesus would go around in towns and villages proclaiming this Good News in stories or parables which are uniquely his own. His listeners are invited to get an insight into what he was trying to tell them. To tell this story was his mission. He told it with authority flowing from his intimate union with his Father. He told it courageously and convincingly without

caring about its fatal consequences. He lived the content of the story. He became the unending story.

### **III. The Uniqueness of Jesus' Stories**

The stories, Jesus told to communicate his Abba-experience and its consequences for his listeners, having a literary style of their own, are known as parables. Only in three Synoptic Gospels can we find these parables. The most colourful and creative presentation of Jesus' parables can be found in the narration of Luke numbering a total of sixteen, while Mathew has only ten which are specifically Matthean and only one is peculiar to Mark out of the six parables found in his version of the Gospel. Lucan narration of Jesus' stories stands out as the most vibrant and lively portrayal of the characters whose soliloquy alone would give us a deep insight into the value system of the character. The rich farmer who had a bumper crop builds a bigger barn and talks to himself about enjoying life as if it were in his control to live and enjoy life without any reference to the One who gives both the length of life and the fruit of the earth (Lk 12). In contrast, the shepherd who lost the sheep shouts aloud with joy and calls others to rejoice with him when he found the lost sheep (Lk 15). He shares his joy. In the Kingdom what matters is sharing and communion with a self-emptying love.

### **Jesus' Stories creates a Crisis for the Listener**

Almost all the parables of Jesus offer the listener of his story a contrasting portrayal of the characters or contrasting situations so that the listener is confronted to make a choice. He or she has to confront himself or herself to see which group they belong to. Either to God's kingdom or to the systems and the structures that would stand against the Kingdom of God. In the Matthean parables the contrast is shown between the foolish and the wise virgins, the generous and forgiving king and the selfish and unforgiving servant, the workers who rejoice over the generosity of the master and the workers who grumble about it. Matthew presents also the contrasting situation of a field with wheat and darnel or a net with good and bad fish. Luke too presents such contrasting characters in his inimitable style. The Good Samaritan is contrasted with the Levite and the priest

(Lk 10), the repentant younger son with self-centered elder son, the rich man with Lazarus, the self-righteous Pharisee with the repentant publican. Sometimes Jesus told stories directly involving the listeners: "Suppose one of you" (Luke 11:5; 14:28; 15:4; and 17:7); "Suppose a woman" (Luke 15:8); "Which of you fathers?" (Matt 7:9; Luke 11:11).

Jesus' parables, thus, confront the listeners with choices they have to make. He creates a crisis for the listener. He or she has to take decision. The choice is between contrasting characters or things which would stand for Kingdom values or anti-kingdom values. It is a choice between accepting God's invitation to experience his love and become authentic humans or reject his invitation and choose the path of destruction. It is a choice between life and death.

### **Jesus Stories Subverts**

Jesus stories are also intended to subvert all unjust and exploitative social and religious structures that enslave humans and would not let them become what they are called to become. Jesus' uncompromising attitude towards systems of dehumanization and exploitation can be seen in some of the stories he narrated. He did not narrate stories to incite the hearers to take up weapons to plunder and destroy or to create anarchy even though he was accused of the same at the end. True to his consciousness of his mission, 'to set the captives free and to proclaim the year of God's favour' he would only open their minds and hearts, heal their blindness to see the true reality of their existence with the infinite possibilities if they would convert and belong to the Kingdom, open their ears to hear God's creative and effective Word and to hear the cry of the deprived, the oppressed and the abandoned, remove the paralysis of their minds to shake off the shackles of dehumanizing religious and social laws and regulations, bring them back to the community which deprived people of true communion by ostracizing them for their sickness of leprosy or hemorrhage Jesus would exorcise people of their demons of helplessness, powerlessness and victimization, bring them back to authentic life and wholeness by offering them his Father's unconditional love and forgiveness. He lived the story of the Kingdom values. No wonder, then, his table-fellowship with the so called sinners, the marginalized, the poor and the outcasts outraged the so called 'respectable' who create systems



of discriminatory divisions in the society and control the majority for their advantage. So Jesus acted out his stories. Probably that is the reason, the Emmaus disciples spoke of him as 'a prophet mighty in word and deed' (Lk 24: 19).

The later Gospels have the tendency to spiritualize his subversive stories, remove the cutting edge to make it acceptable to many. Sometimes they convert parables in to allegories as in the case of the parable of the sower or to close all Jesus' parables which were most probably open-ended as they were narrated by him. According to W. Herzog who interprets parables are subversive speech in the context of an oppressive social situation,

The focus of the parables is not on a vision of the glory of the reign of God, but on the gory details of how oppression serves the interests of a ruling class. Parables explore how human beings could respond to break the spiral of violence and the cycle of poverty created by such exploitation. Therefore the parables of Jesus were forms of social analysis just as much as they were forms of theological reflection<sup>3</sup>

The subversive character of Jesus' stories can be illustrated by the parable of the Labourers who were recruited by the Landowner at different hours of the day (Mt 20: 1-16). The usual interpretation of the parable with its moralizing lessons show the generosity of the Landowner who gives even the last ones an equal wage like that of the first ones who labored the whole day. It seems to show the generosity of God before whom all are equal, the first and the last. And therefore one has to rejoice over his generosity and not grumble about it. A second look at the parable without the first half of the first sentence (The Kingdom of God is like this) and the last sentence ("So the last will be first, and the first will be last" (Mt 20:16) gives us a shocking picture. Probably this was the original parable Jesus told. The division of the society is clear, consisting of rich landowners and the landless who are desperately struggling for survival. Sometimes the landless might have been the holders of small pieces of land for their survival but lost it to the rich landowner unable to pay the debt they had taken due to succeeding failure of crops. Or the land was bought up by a real estate mafia. They have become day-labourers

to be hired. Certain editing of the original story is evident from the way it is narrated. The Landowner goes out to hire workers. An unlikely action when in the story there appears a manager who was asked to pay the labourers. The landowner's attitude towards the labourers is typical of any elite even in our own society. Why are the majority poor? Because they are 'idle', or lazy. However those who were hired at the eleventh hour do not buy this biased judgment about them. They affirmed that they were willing to work but they were not hired. Then the cynical and ostentatious landowner plays the game of acting as a generous and condescending rich who thinks that others are at his mercy. By paying the last ones first, the same amount he had agreed upon with the first ones, he insults those whom he had hired in the morning and show them that he is in full control of everything and that he would not care about their toil of the whole day in the scorching sun. They are all at his mercy. They are all puppets in his hand. By his apparently courteous address to one of the workers, 'friend', he demeans even the preciousness of that all-encompassing and affectionate word 'friend' because his following interaction with him is to ask him to 'take what belongs to you and get out'. Further, his arrogance is revealed by claiming that everything as his own and he would do with it whatever he chooses to do. The landowner forgets that what he claims to be his own is, in reality, not his own. It belongs to God and therefore it belongs to all needy persons. This landowner is not much different from the landowner who built bigger barns after a bumper crop and wanted to enjoy everything thinking that everything belonged to him and him alone.

Jesus' stories subvert the existing value systems whether economic, social or religious which are anti-God and anti-Kingdom. He subverts the religious system that promotes a group of religious elite who think that they can manipulate God and religious structures and institutions for their own advantage and despise the poor and marginalize and exclude them as sinners. The story of the righteous Pharisee and the repentant Publican is a typical example of it. In the story of the Good Samaritan he subverts the social system of excluding people in the name of caste and ethnicity showing that it is not the human-made system of exclusion and inclusion or *we* and *they* that

makes one really human but reaching out to the needy brother or sister. Jesus lived and died for the values of the Kingdom where all are brothers and sisters and the law is only the law of love.

### **Jesus' Stories are Open-ended**

Jesus' stories differ from all other stories of antiquity including the Greco-Roman and Rabbinic stories. J. Breech who made a serious research on Jesus' parables arrives at this conclusion that Jesus' parables were dissimilar from all those extant to three hundred years before his time and three hundred years after his time. Jesus' parables do not have an ending or closure because he narrated stories without moralizing.<sup>4</sup> For example, we are not told whether the good Samaritan was rewarded for his action or whether he returned at all to the inn where the wounded man was kept or the elder son got reconciled with the younger son etc. Jesus stories do not end. Their purpose is not to close the narration but to confront the listener's orientation in life, disorient it and if he or she is open to the revelation God, humans and the world in Jesus, then re-orient their lives according to the values of the Kingdom. According to J. Breech, like the characters of Jesus' parables, Jesus lives in a story without end. For J. D. Crossan, Jesus, the parabler became the parable. Jesus died as a parabler and rose as a Parable. While myths establish the world and a mythical religion gives final word about reality and thus excludes the authentic experience of reality, a parabolic religion subverts the final word about reality and thereby opens up the possibility of transcendence.<sup>5</sup> Jesus, the parable, continues to subvert all human tendencies to find false security in those systems that provide humans with an illusory comfort either in their false self or in wealth, position and power. His parable is a critique and challenge to humans to unfold themselves in authentic communion with God, humans and the world by growing in transcendence by breaking all the boundaries of enslavement. So his story would continue to subvert till the end of time.

### **Conclusion**

Jesus, the Story, and the stories Jesus told, continue to have a universal appeal because every human and everything in the world find a place in this story. Jesus, being the Mystery of God, humans



and the world, revealed in history, in telling and retelling his story humans discover their divine call to become authentic humans or to realize their vocation as humans. Jesus stories emanated from his Abba experience and they confronted every listener with a God-given plan to unfold and become authentically human like Jesus. Jesus stories continue subvert all systems and structures that would not let God's dream for humans to realize themselves in this world. Jesus continues to live his story and like the stories he narrated he too remains open-ended. In the Indian context where there is a rich tradition of communicating religious experience through stories, the all-embracing and all-transforming story of Jesus can touch the lives of millions of people if it is shared by those who have a deep Christic experience. Therefore, the challenge of every committed disciple of Jesus is to live his or her story within the plot of the larger story of Jesus Christ and continue his prophetic mission of confronting the anti-God and anti-Kingdom situation by reliving Jesus' story and retelling his stories in our context whatever be the consequences.

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## Book Review

*John Britto Chethimattam, A Pioneer of Indian Christian Theology.*  
Edited by **Kuncheria Pathil** CMI and **Shaji George Kochuthara** CMI,  
Dharmaram Publications (2007)

*Jeevadhara* has to be given credit for honoring one of its anchoring theologians, Dr. John Britto Chethimattam, by organizing a symposium on his contributions to Indian Christian theology and for bringing out the materials of the symposium in book form under the editor-ship of two noted theologians. The selection of the topics for the papers and the selection of persons who presented the papers were most appropriate as each one has done the work assigned to him in an excellent way. Dharmaram Publications has brought it out beautifully.

The book is divided into three parts. In the first part three people who were very closely associated with him in three different capacities give a profile of Dr. John Britto. Fr. Constantine who had him as a close associate of his theological venture until his last days gives a concise and vivid biographical note and character sketch of Dr. John Britto. Dr. Thomas Kadankavil, who was a student, research scholar and a colleague of Dr. John Britto describes him as a wrestler like patriarch Jacob and as a debater like Adi Sankara. Dr. Kadankavil observes that Dr. John Britto was a person who absorbed the views, ideas, and categories of all philosophic thoughts from Plato/Aristotle to the post-modern positive and negative secular philosophers, so much so that his lectures, writings and books make some of his students and readers confused at times. Fr. Mathias Mundadan, a colleague of Dr. John Britto from his early days of teachings, describes him as a versatile and scholarly teacher, who was also prolific in learning, teaching, writing, debating and working. Dr. Mathias gives a historical perspective of an impulsive and argumentative genius growing and maturing down to an advocate of *koinonia*, communion. At every field of theologizing Dr. John Britto was searching for a higher synthesis and the quest still remains open for his followers to pursue and reach their own conclusions.

Part II of the book contains the critical evaluation of the major works of Dr. John Britto and Part III deals with his other contributions. All these critical evaluations are made by reputed philosophers, thinkers and theologians, who are mostly students of Dr. John Britto distributed over a span of 40 years. For example, Dr. Cyriac Kanichai, who is one of his early students, examines his first major work, *Consciousness*

*and Reality*, in its original context of the *Sat-Chit* of Sankara and Ramanuja and also in the context of the modern Phenomenologist philosophers Heidegger and others. While pointing out certain unresolved issues in the Vedantic dialectico-dialogical hermeneutics of Dr. John Britto, Dr. Kanichai appreciates his guru for presenting valid and potential premises for deeper study and more coherent conclusions for the new generations of philosophers and theologians.

Dr. Saju Chakkalakal has evaluated the second major work of Dr Britto published under two names , *Dialogue in Indian Tradition* (1969) in Bangalore and *Patterns of Indian Thought* (1971) London, with great insight and philosophical acumen. He has analysed in depth the dialectico-dialogical methodology of Dr. John Britto in journeying through the patterns of Indian thought, which is a millennia long dialogue in the Indian continent characterized by synthesis, tolerance and harmonious coexistence. Dr. Saju could have taken a milder attitude to Dr. John Britto's typically tolerant stand on the Rig Vedic and Upanishadic approach to caste system in India.

As a detailed analysis of all the papers is beyond the scope of this review I would limit my remarks to a few general observations on all the published papers. Every paper published in the book is illuminating, scholarly comprehensive and objective. The book shows the growth of the mind of Dr. John Britto who started his philosophic quest for being and truth from the starting point of the Western objective philosophy of St Thomas with its roots in Plato and Aristotle and after having plunged into the Eastern subjective thought pattern of Advaita Vedanta of Sankara and Ramanuja , emerged as a pioneer of Indian Christian theology. He blended the socio-cultural and dialogical traditions of Indian religious thought pattern with the post-Vatican Christology, ecclesiology, missiology and ecumenical dialogue in his pioneering effort for an Indian Christian theology. The conflux of ideas in Dr. John Britto's works may be confusing to some but it was a coherent whole for him. Moreover who is a better philosopher, theologian or teacher in the last analysis, the one who clarifies and solves all the problems for his students or the one who specifies the issues, defines the premises and leaves the question open for others to reach coherent conclusions and solutions of their own? All in all, the book is an invaluable contribution to research in Indian Christian theology.